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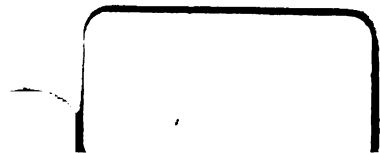
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# LATE LAURELS.

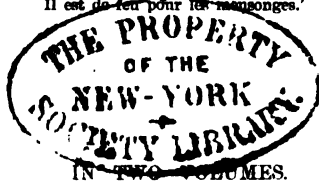
BY THE

• AUTHOR OF 'WHEAT AND TARES'

[Sir Henry S. Cunningham.]

'Satis magnum alter alteri thestrum sumus.'

'Chacun tourna en réalités,  
Autant qu'il peut, ses propres songes;  
L'homme est de glace aux vérités,  
Il est de feu pour les mensonges.'



IN TWO VOLUMES.

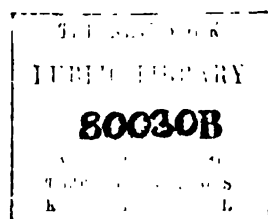
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# CONTENTS

OF

## THE FIRST VOLUME.



CHAPTER I.	
FORESHADOWING . . . . .	PAGE 1
CHAPTER II.	
LA BELLE DÉDAIGNEUSE . . . . .	23
CHAPTER III.	
DEFEAT . . . . .	53
CHAPTER IV.	
PLUCKED . . . . .	63
CHAPTER V.	
THE FATTED CALF . . . . .	81
CHAPTER VI.	
HELEN . . . . .	111
CHAPTER VII.	
THE FIRST PARALLEL OPENED . . . . .	125
CHAPTER VIII.	
FURENS QUID FEMINA POSSIT . . . . .	145

CHAPTER IX.	
	PAGE
HOW HAPPY COULD I BE WITH EITHER . . . .	169
CHAPTER X.	
A MATCH . . . . .	179
CHAPTER XI.	
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING . . . . .	208
CHAPTER XII.	
NELLY IS CONFIDENTIAL . . . . .	237
CHAPTER XIII.	
FOR BETTER FOR WORSE . . . . .	266



## LATE LAURELS.



FORESHADOWING.

— an English home; grey twilight poured  
On dewy pastures, dewy trees,  
Softer than sleep: all things in order stored,  
A haunt of ancient peace.

UNDERWOOD MANOR-HOUSE was regarded, not without reason, by the young people of the neighbourhood, in the light of a realised paradise. Boys liked it because ponies abounded in the paddocks, pointers and terriers about the yards and lodges, and all sorts of good things upon the garden walls. Girls liked it for its rambling passages, the mysterious splendour of its rooms, its quaint pictures, its cabinets of picturesque curiosities, the peacocks which strutted on the terrace, and the conservatory, where Mrs. Evelyn and an old Scotch gardener contrived

between them to make summer seem eternal. Boys and girls alike instinctively appreciated the hearty welcome, and the effortless hospitality, which awaited them on the part of the squire and his lady. Many a little creature, secure of sympathy and consolation, intrusted her first trouble to Mrs. Evelyn's ear, or committed some too audacious request to her advocacy and protection. Many were the fortunate lads who imperilled their own existence by futile attempts upon that of the Underwood rabbits; who invaded the stables, disturbed the pheasants, decimated the peaches, and, in fact, did all those pleasant things which gild the fancy of imaginative youth, but are for the most part objected to by country gentlemen, and the subordinate army of country gentlemen's officials. The Underwood grooms and keepers, however, were infected by their master's benevolence, and regarded all juvenile delinquencies indulgently, as a venial and interesting characteristic of the time of life. Old Marston, the absolute despot of the woods, all whose ideas seemed concentrated in a malignant detestation of hawks and weasels, had yet a tender side for aspiring sportsmen, and had submitted more than once with laudable resignation

.. i q v n

to being 'peppered' by beginners, whose zeal got the better of their prudence. 'I be glad you're come, Jim,' he once observed to one of the beaters, who joined him at the corner of the plantation—'Master Charles have been pouring it into me most awful.' A special providence, however, preserved him and his leathern gaiters from annihilation, and Marston survived to reap a golden harvest, from a list of crack shots who had received their initiatory instructions at his hands. Thus, between master and servants, Underwood was a cheerful place; yet its cheerfulness resulted more from determined good-nature than from the absence of materials for melancholy. A sort of fatality had seemed of late years to hang over the Manor-house; the generation of Evelyns, which would naturally have been just now at its prime, was already extinct, and a party of grandchildren supplied the place and enjoyed the privileges of the missing sons and daughters. Time after time had the Squire entered the little Underwood chancel, as chief mourner for children, whose vital energies had seemed to fail them just when strength should have been greatest, and the prospect of danger the most remote.

One daughter, whose memory seemed now to her parents an almost unearthly dream of tender loveliness, had scarcely left the schoolroom, when she sank into a decline. Charles, the eldest son, frightened, while still in his honeymoon, by some unaccountable symptom of increasing feebleness, had carried off his bride to Italy, and endeavoured, under a sunny sky, to stave off the fate which he felt creeping pitilessly upon him. He soon knew it to be in vain, and turned homeward to die. For a while his widow lingered on at Underwood, the scene of her first love and her great trouble. Every one in the house, from highest to lowest, had a tender greeting for her little son, the inheritor of his father's name, tone, and manner; of the faultless temper which, Mrs. Evelyn declared, was the characteristic failing of all the males of the family; and of the good looks, which her nervous judgment construed into a warning of constitutional delicacy.

For a while the strangeness of her position, the poignancy of her grief, and the satisfaction of seeing her child duly installed as future possessor of Underwood, had reconciled young Mrs. Evelyn to the company of old people and children, and to the sober enjoyments of a country

house  
pleat  
grew  
came  
an ex  
conti  
ance  
enjoy  
fell  
chief  
them  
simila  
membr  
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St. Au  
of the  
marrie  
shortly  
St. Au  
were b  
establi  
alread  
first  
seeme  
hood,



and occupations, the home they had lost, and the misfortune which had befallen them.

Margaret, however, by no means in reality shared the indifference of her sister and her cousin. Her mother's death had sunk deep into her heart, and she still remembered with agonising distinctness the misery which it had cost her. She was endowed with a precocity for suffering, which her childlike playfulness, reserved language, and simple demeanour, prevented those around her from suspecting. She had seen too far into her sorrow, gauged it too thoroughly, and drunk too deeply of the bitter cup, to be content with the commonplace consolations which might have seemed naturally befitting to her age, or to be speedily aroused from the half-lethargy of grief into which her loss had benumbed her. She recalled the darkened room, the wan, scarcely distinguishable form, the wasted, feeble hand that was laid tremulously in her own, the longing eye, full of unspoken tenderness, the failing voice, that—half prophecy, half injunction—bade her supply alike to husband and child the void which, a few hours later, death was to make in the household. The charge, dimly understood at the time, had taken possession of her mind, had more and

more absorbed her thoughts, and had gradually become the ruling principle of her life. While her father lived, she had watched him with an eager fidelity, had tempted him from the solitude of his regret, and cheered him with abortive efforts at companionship, which would have been amusing, but that they were completely pathetic. At her father's death, the removal of one half of her responsibility made her but more keenly sensitive as to the other; and the superfluous devotion which most children throw away on pets or playthings, was concentrated, in Margaret's case, on a little, wayward, petulant, capricious beauty, who soon awoke to the privileges of her position, and realised the agreeable fact that at least one person in the house considered her happiness the chief end of existence.

Protection, however, is no step to complete intimacy; and Margaret's zealous guardianship placed her on an eminence above her sister, far greater than the few years which divided them would ordinarily have explained. It did more, for it effectually marred the enjoyment which her sister's society would otherwise have afforded her. Saint as she already was, she was still a child, and childhood has its prerogatives, which,

despite everything, it clings to tenaciously, and resigns at last not without regret, weariness, and compunction. Margaret at times, in her morbid nervousness lest harm should befall her sister, felt that a heavy burden weighed upon her spirits, and betrayed the fact by the buoyant cheerfulness into which her cousin's company at once aroused her. For Charles's indiscretions she felt no responsibility, and she regarded them accordingly with an agreeable mixture of terror, wonderment, and delight. There was a sort of fascination in seeing him break down the pale she so religiously respected, and trifle with what were to her inviolable mandates. Charles was a sufficiently naughty lad, availed himself to the full of the privileges of his position, and was troubled with no compunctious visitings as to the amount of inconvenience or annoyance entailed upon any portion of the household by his misdeeds. The Squire had once or twice been roused to actual wrath; Mrs. Evelyn tried, and tried in vain, to impress him with the sinfulness of little sins; and the housekeeper, fairly at the end of her endurance, looked upon him as a vessel of wrath, providentially designed for the disturbance of the Manor-house, the destruction of puddings



and preserves, and the complete embitterment of her closing years. All, however, confessed secretly that his heart was good, his truthfulness unimpeachable, and his delinquencies such as the future lord of Underwood had almost a right to indulge in. Margaret regarded him with an affectionate awe; she bit her lips, and opened her great brown eyes, and trembled with excitement, while Charles scaled the dizzy heights of towering elm-trees, set gunpowder volcanoes in a blaze of smoky glory, or brought a wild cortège of tandemmed donkeys to what Americans would call 'an everlasting smash,' in the haha of the park.

It was for these children that the festivity with which my story opens was designed. It was midsummer, and the Sandyford meadows were trim and glittering, still fresh from the scythe. The last cartload of hay had been safely housed without a drop of rain, and the Squire's overflowing satisfaction imperatively demanded an outburst. His youngest grandchild's birthday was an excellent pretext for some such unceremonious hospitalities as best accorded with Mr. Evelyn's present hilarity, the resources of his establishment, and the taste of the neighbourhood. Accordingly, in

the shade of one of the great lime-trees, which stretched from the drawing-room windows down to the river's side, a banquet had been prepared, and a great many eager guests were assembled. Mrs. Evelyn, already enjoying the privileges of an invalid, was ensconced in an easy chair, so placed as to command full sight of all that was going on, without exposing her too much to the tumult of the occasion. The Squire, who for forty years had been an assiduous lover, and whose old age had lost none of the chivalry of youth, found his way often enough to her side, and, resting awhile from his duties as a host, joined with her in quiet contemplation of the scene. With how pleasant a melancholy would their thoughts at such times wander back to the long period happily passed together, its brightness already tinged with the first gathering shade that told of approaching night! How long ago it seemed, and yet how near, that old, dearly beloved, half misty world, rich with remembered joys, griefs, anxieties, the common burden of both—the pleasant days of early married life—the calmer happiness of middle age—the dreadful hours of sickening hope or passionate sorrow—all now mellowed by distance, and borrowing a new

and tenderer grace from the feeling, stronger day by day, that it was not for ever, and that the end was at hand ! What a vista of pleasant gatherings under these trees, where a new generation of children were already at play ! Where was the old world, to which they belonged ? How natural that Mrs. Evelyn, as she sat with her husband's hand in hers, should find her eyes dim with tears, and from time to time a louder shout or merrier burst of laughter than usual should recall her from a reverie, in which past and present were strangely and sadly mixed together, and of which he alone would have been capable of appreciating the whole interest and pathos !

A goodly crowd was collected on the lawn. For an hour past juvenile contingents from all the neighbouring houses had been dropping in, and by this time the assembly presented a really imposing appearance. Charles, in the full splendour of a public-schoolboy's first holidays, acted as his grandfather's aide-de-camp, and with officious enthusiasm devoted himself to the general entertainment.

Nelly, in whose honour the festival was given, wore her mock dignity with an easy grace, and evinced a ready aptitude for the arts of queen-

ship. Her sudden changes of expression, and an occasional imperiousness of manner, would have told a careful observer that her reign, if good-natured and generous, would be liable to capricious fits, despotic impulses, and gusts of passion. Nature had gifted her, however, with a persuasive prettiness of manner. Already her grandfather pronounced her an adept in the arts of enlightened tyranny, and, appreciating both her pleasant and her haughty moods, and setting a high price on domestic peace and quiet, extended to her an indulgence that was not without its tinge of cowardice.

The feast had scarcely begun when there came a clatter up the approach, next the muffled sound of wheels and hoofs upon the grass; a carriage, somewhat over-splendidly appointed, drove rapidly along the avenue; a fine pair of greys were brought to a reluctant halt beneath the lime-trees; a glittering, powdered footman sprang to the ground; and in another instant the Squire, cut short in the distribution of a gigantic syllabub, hurried to help the new-comers to the ground, carried off Mrs. Vivien to a place of honour by his wife, put her husband in command of an end of the table, and found a place for her daughter

among the banqueters nearest himself. The Vivien had lately become owners of Clyffe, a handsome place some dozen miles away. As yet, they were not much known, nor altogether liked. They were wealthy, and made no secret of the fact; and the county in general resented an ostentatious splendour which it was easy to construe into an affront to the existing order of things. Mrs. Vivien's smart barouche quite eclipsed the ponderously-magnificent vehicles in which, for a generation past, the neighbouring magnates had exchanged visits of state, and the dog-carts and pony-carriages in which people made their way to one another on less ceremonious occasions. Mrs. Vivien, it was generally admitted, was fine to vulgarity. Her house was an upholsterer's palace, her jewels too profuse, her little girl was over-dressed, her liveries were gaudy, and the powdered heads and silk stockings of her servants were the objects of general contempt and indignation.

The surrounding landowners, each the undoubted lord of his own little principality, and guarding his prerogative with a jealous care, watched with a half-pitying contempt the efforts of a *nouveau riche* to outshine them, and greeted

magistrate's meetings with  
due to an 'outsider.' The  
a longer purse, sharper wits,  
of the world, than them-  
sary from the Carlton had  
forcibly before the little knot  
directed the politics of the  
Vivien, along with another  
ay to a seat in St. Stephen's,  
egun to enjoy the increased  
a political eminence could  
Mrs. Vivien, though she re-  
succeeded in doing so, had  
to undergo, which were none  
cause they had to be entirely  
ire, as a county, unanimously  
ery should seem misplaced  
Nobody made the least effort  
scale: the wife of the lord-  
abbiest possible attire, drove  
etland ponies over to Clyffe,  
to be betrayed into London  
felt that she was being ex-  
ng when she applauded the  
and asked how much the



Lady Dangerfield, whose husband was the Major's colleague, after ignoring her existence for six months, came at last, with a thousand pretty speeches, flattered her too grossly for belief, and concluded, with a great deal of transparent politeness, by a request that Mrs. Vivien should take her place as patroness of a Decayed Washerwomen's Institution, of which her ladyship made no secret that she was heartily sick.

Mrs. Vivien felt provoked, in spite of herself, when, at the best places in the country, she found the mistress of the house going with gruel and flannel to a poor woman's cottage; the gentlemen at cricket on the lawn, with an eleven eked out with garden-boys and grooms; and the young ladies either 'scoring' for their brothers, or busy, in garden-gloves and brown-holland pinafores, among their roses and geraniums. Nowhere had Mrs. Vivien been less successful than at Underwood; and, though the Squire's sincerity was generally unimpeachable, we may suspect that her arrival at the present moment was thoroughly inopportune, and the welcome she received all the more studiously courteous for being consciously hypocritical.

Charles, less discriminating and more impres-

# LATE LAURELS.

grandfather, was thoroughly pleased; and the young lady, who was his charge, had every qualification for tumult in a schoolboy's heart. She had her mother's character for face, and something more. Her mother had been more agreeable, but for the confidence of her manner, and for the ease with which the skilful fingers of her mother had somewhat too generously employed her. She was strikingly graceful; but her mother which never forgot itself, and in her mother's services were unduly employed. She had lived for years abroad, and was a grown-up people; accordingly, she was English nor childlike; and the studies were probably in the right place. She pronounced her vain and forward, but expressed not wisely, but too well, and, in her mother's precocious flirt.

He was proud of his position as quasi-host, and a single quarter at Eton of any of the opposite sex—devoted himself to his companion, was delighted to find her being being could devour strawberries and being being talkative, confidential, affec-



tionate, and, before the repast was concluded, had agreed upon an interchange of Christian names, and boldly proffered his claim for the dance that was to follow.

‘You can dance?’ Florence inquired, already sagaciously distrustful of an incapable partner.

Charles’s education was happily sufficiently complete to justify an affirmative reply, and to secure him the wished-for boon. With the joyfulness of a first success, he led away his prospective partner to the garden, and proceeded to fill up the interval, which was to elapse before the dance began, with some of those sage remarks which older people than he have been known, under similar circumstances, to indulge in.

Florence was content with the size, comeliness, and dignity, of her admirer; and listened graciously as he became more and more loquacious. Presently they came to the flower-beds, now all ablaze with Mrs. Evelyn’s favourite roses.

‘Oh!’ cried the siren, already an adept in the conduct of a flirtation, ‘how beautiful—how very, very beautiful!’

Her victim caught greedily at the bait, chose a pretty cluster of buds, and encountered but the

LATE LAURELS.

opposition, and soon found that  
more than satisfied.

ed them skilfully to her dress;  
ught that never surely yet was  
adorned.

y?' she asked.

he said, fervently; but whether  
earer was in reality the object of  
ust be left for ever to conjecture.

music began: four fiddlers, trans-  
music-loft of Underwood Church,  
ecasion, the habitual solemnity of  
dashed heroically into a country  
ire opened the ball in state with  
set an example of alacrity which

to imitate. Then followed a  
fiddlers surpassed themselves.

cavalier, with the inexperienced  
youth, soon danced themselves

were happily resuscitating them-  
ext dance, when Margaret came

ed her cousin that he had been  
heroine of the occasion. The

mised to Nelly, and the homage  
as queen of the feast made her

rieved at the desertion. It

was in vain that Charles pleaded her diminutive size, his duty to their guests, his engagement to another partner, the abundance of little boys with whom Nelly might solace herself. Margaret was firm, Charles's conscience tender; and, at last, duty carried the day. Florence resigned him with a petulant indifference, nor did the promise of a speedy return seem to go far towards allaying her irritation. With an angry gesture she swept out her dress, flashed Margaret an angry glance from her grey, cruel eyes, and stalked away, like a ruffled bird, to conceal her resentment as best she might. Presently Charles hurried back, and found that his successor was already selected. Florence, the stormy look still lingering in her eyes, was helping an inexperienced performer through a very rudimentary polka, and seemed quite disinclined for reconciliation.

'*Je te rends ta rose,*' she cried; bringing her partner to a halt beside her, and handing him the flower, with a little disdainful courtesy.

'What,' cried the other, you won't have it?—why not?'

'Because,' said Florence, demurely, 'I love constancy, and you are a monster.'

‘A monster?’ asked Margaret, who was standing by them, and was already woman enough to long to battle for anyone whom she loved; ‘Charles a monster?’

‘Yes,’ Florence answered, warming rapidly into the quarrel. ‘And why, pray, did you want him to leave me?’

Margaret, for the first time in her life the subject of an angry speech, looked up in surprise at her companion’s eager tones, and at the commotion in which her spirits seemed to be.

‘I wanted him,’ she said, ‘to keep his word; dance with him now as long as you please.’

By this time Florence was again in the midst of the dancers, as radiant as ever; but she treasured up the fancied injury in her heart, gave it a niche in her memory, and paid it back, years after, with all the accumulated interest of a long-concealed dislike.

The dancers wearied; the fiddlers—their stock of secular music at an end—showed symptoms of collapsing into hymns; and some one called out for a change of entertainment.

‘A race for little girls,’ cried the Squire, ‘round the holly-tree at the bottom of the lawn. Everyone must have a colour.’

‘And I,’ cried Florence, looking down at her dress, ‘will be white.’

‘And red,’ petitioned Charles, offering her the rejected rose again.

Florence was in no unrelenting mood: she reinstated the rose in her bosom, banished her admirer’s despondency by a pretty smile, and stood eagerly watching for the signal to be off.

A dozen started: but a few yards sufficed to show between whom the race would lie. One after another of the runners fell panting towards the rear: and before half the race was done, Florence and Margaret had the field between them. Both were resolved to win, both heard the applause that greeted them at the starting-place: neck and neck, they strained towards the holly bush, which was the turning-point of the course. It was a thick, wide-spreading, veteran tree; and whoever got safely round it first might look upon victory as achieved. For a few seconds the two were lost to sight: there was a moment’s confusion in passing; Margaret, for an instant, was off her balance, at her rival’s mercy. A tiny push, dexterously given, threw her prostrate on the grass, and decided the fortunes of the day. In another minute, Florence flew in at the head



THE LAURELS.

golden hair streaming wildly  
goddess in a cloud of muslin  
d, excited, but more beautiful  
Charles, too much captivated to  
Cousin's predicament, banished  
hesitation, and plunged head-  
long delirium of a first love.

## CHAPTER II.

## LA BELLE DÉDAIGNEUSE.

'Yes' I answered you last night,  
 'No' this morning, sir, I say;  
 Colours viewed by candle-light  
 Will not look the same by day.

IMAGINE ten years to have past away, and Florence to have reached the zenith of her beauty and the full scope of a vigorous intellect. She was twenty; but she was old of her age; and at a time when many young ladies are still immersed in the diatonic scales and the use of the globes, she had already seen much of the world, had formed a theory of success, and was thoroughly versed in the arts of fascination.

Her school-room career had come to an early and disastrous close. It had been a state of almost chronic rebellion. One luckless instructress after another had endeavoured to tame her into submission, had exhausted all resources of art,



ATE LAURELS.

and had abandoned the task as  
cable. Insurrections had been  
so difficult to maintain, that it  
the incapable dynasty came to  
always contrived to make her-  
jured party, and whenever she  
usually naughty, would come  
tears in her eyes, to take the  
aint. But the concurrent testi-  
of dethroned sovereigns pro-  
tile, distracted, incapable of  
y in pursuit of pleasure, but  
most as soon as tasted; on the  
completely ungovernable.

history,' she would say, with a  
cal beauty Major Vivien never  
es fly in at one ear and out at  
phy gives me the headache, rule  
zle me, and practice—especially  
tets with Madlle. Lafitte—doth

hand,' her father would say,  
fine clothes; you are perfectly  
got a man to manage; you are  
coquette, and you do precisely  
me.'



‘Don’t laugh at me, pray,’ Florence replied, with the air of a martyr; ‘you do not know what Mademoiselle makes me undergo.’

‘I am sure,’ her father answered sententially, ‘you have a most agreeable and improving companion.’

‘I only wish,’ said Florence, vehemently, ‘that you had to go for walks with her.’

The Major was obliged to admit the cogency of the argument, and Mademoiselle Lafitte shared the fate of her predecessors. Florence remained mistress of the field, and plunged with eager exultation into the enjoyment of her new-found independence. Then came a London season, and she liked it better even than she had hoped; her mother’s tastes and her own coincided so far that each loved pleasure dearly, each knew how to turn her beauty to the best account, each found the excitement of society irresistibly delightful. There, however, the resemblance ceased. Florence’s character contained an element of nobility which made her an enigma to her parents, and disappointed all Mrs. Vivien’s hopes and calculations for her advancement. Everything conspired to spoil her; yet the promptings of a higher nature, never entirely silenced, from time to time asserted

# ATE LAURELS.

ority, and though falling short  
 her, in despite of herself and  
 from complete degradation.  
 from her childhood up, her  
 to the mirror had encouraged  
 among the first of feminine  
 was frivolous, and her life was  
 trifles. She loved power, and  
 adepts in chicanery; homage,  
 only too abundant; amuse-  
 ments made it the great end of  
 the world in which they moved  
 and her with dissatisfaction, wear-  
 ing. She felt it to be mean, and,  
 of a better, refused it any but  
 al, and half-indignant homage.  
 lavement stirred her to abso-  
 lute success was worth something, she  
 the price that people paid;  
 ts, but it was a petty despotism  
 ce accordingly failed for want,  
 or success, but of thoroughness  
 day she courted applause, and  
 by some rash speech or word;  
 ls, but frightened them from  
 sarcasm, or cooled them by a

negligent mood. Sometimes she dazzled, sometimes she shocked; now she bent herself to fascinate, now defied all customary rule, and startled the tame world around by some gratuitous outrage. Men hovered round her, wondered, admired, and sometimes in a credulous moment, putting their fortunes to the test, found Florence's heart completely unapproachable, and retired in wrath, humiliation, and discomfiture.

Two seasons passed away, and Florence was still unmarried. Her mother—teased by vagaries which she could not understand, and by the loss of opportunities which might not recur—made no secret of her displeasure, and upbraided her with her husbandless condition, as the natural result of her indiscreet behaviour. Florence indeed did her best to exhaust the patience of the vigilant chaperone who was bent on disposing of her advantageously. A momentary freak undid the work of months of maternal anxiety, and tumbled the painfully-built edifice in ruins to the ground. For half a summer she chased a little lordling with creditable assiduity; and, just when the game was in her hand, and her mother thought the victory won, threw it wantonly away, and scared off the astonished millionaire by an outburst of ridicule and dislike.



LATE LAURELS.

was speechless with wrath, and protested at such a wanton waste of money.

'Marquesses,' he cried, 'are not to be met in the streets, I can tell you; and your rude speeches, Florence, is a thousand a year.'

Mrs Vivien, 'and the Scamperly beyond all belief.'

'No diamonds!' cried Florence, 'I have not the least aspiration to them, though I suffer in a coronet, like the duchesses in London to sympathy in their sufferings.'

'Fiddlestick!' cried her father; 'fiddlestick! money is as good as the rest.'

'I am not,' cried his daughter; 'I am not, and besides, he scarcely reaches up to the level of the other.'

'I resolved to break our hearts,' said Major Vivien, 'and I am doing so consolately.'

'The least intention,' Florence said, 'of letting you break mine.'

'The mission ended; but Major Vivien was not without the conviction of his daughter's self and her mother, and was

thoroughly frightened whenever she chose to put their proceedings in a ridiculous light. Florence's shortcomings, however, gave plenty of openings for retaliation; and her father—with whom Pope was the first of philosophers—used to declaim about the triviality of the feminine character, and to quote couplets triumphantly at her, whenever some unusually feminine characteristic made itself apparent.

“No thought advances,” he would cry, “but her eddying brain whisks it about, and down it goes again”—there is your portrait, my dear Florence, to the life.’

‘Those were the horrid women of George the Second’s time; and neither you, papa, nor Mr. Pope, know anything about us.’

‘You, at any rate, are inexplicable, I admit,’ said her father, as he moved away from the breakfast-table, where the discussion had been conducted, and settled himself, newspaper in hand, in a bay-window, commanding a full view of the glittering garden beds and the park beyond, hazy already in the glaring August sunlight. ‘How beautiful the country is!’

‘Yes,’ said Florence, in a despondent tone, ‘how beautiful—and how very, very dull!’



himself back in his chair with  
 silence, and burst into a con-  
 Pope again !' he cried. "O  
 !" Of course, having led  
 tional existence for nearly a  
 ennuyée to death; I hoped,  
 ere too heartily sick of town  
 wanted.'

ence, resolutely, 'it is dull, you  
 though we were all tired, one  
 thing in a fortnight.'

country, my dear,' observed  
 when she deserted the congenial  
 om tactics, plunged at once  
 e most unquestionable plati-

ence; 'but who made the  
 and the Heavysire archery  
 county balls, mamma, and the  
 everything else that is distract-  
 ave a bow and arrow like the  
 ing of rural admirers to pick  
 ?'

groaned her father, whose  
 per party eight miles off the  
 him, in his heart of hearts,

to believe Florence altogether in the wrong. 'When you are in the country, for goodness' sake be a little countrified; cease awhile from flirting to be wise; forget that there are any men in the world beside the footmen, the parish parson, and myself. Visit in the cottages, teach in the school, amuse yourself in the garden. Last week I paid fifty guineas to your drawing-master; why should you not sketch the trees in the park? there is plenty of variety, I am sure.'

'An enchanting programme,' cried Florence, with an air of half-amused resentment. 'Let me see—trees, cottages, school-children, and a plot in the garden! *Merci, mon cher papa!* if that is what the country means, I am for the town, whoever made it.'

'We shall have a houseful next week,' observed her mother, latently sympathising with any complaint of *ennui*. 'Mr. Erle is coming, and I hope he will amuse us.'

'I hope he will,' Florence said, fervently. 'Meantime, I must take my choice from papa's list of dissipations.'

Florence's endurance, however, was not long put to the test: her mother had not promised in vain. September was at hand, and Clyffe began



THE LAURELS.

Major Vivien was a languid  
favoured by hospitalities in the  
his senatorial shortcomings in  
supporters who had earned a  
and Mrs. Vivien knew well the  
prompt invitation; there were  
with whom it was a point of  
large hospitalities; there were  
disposed to take offence, whose  
e fanned into a blaze by an  
t; lastly, there were a number  
with the summer upon their  
gh at their leisure, who had  
turnip fields before, and were  
second opportunity of perdricide.  
her list of visitors swelling  
convenient length; Florence re-  
tion; and the Major protested  
London over again, without the  
peace and quiet which London  
at he heartily wished himself  
all.

ent of provincials: Sir Agricola  
field, and two young ladies,  
iest arrivals, and, as Florence  
a very pleasant rural effect



about the house. Next followed the colonel of the regiment quartered at Sandyford, with a female train of dependents; next an idle barrister, who had defended the Major in his last election committee. Two days later Captain Bibo and Lord Scamperly, who generally travelled in company, posted across from the Duke of Pondercast's, and brought an agreeable aroma of political and fashionable gossip, which Sir Agricola and his daughters seemed equally to appreciate. Captain Bibo was a sturdy bachelor, who campaigned very jovially through life, was a formidable judge of claret, a first-rate shot, had an excellent digestion, and no conscience whatever worth mentioning. Scamperly was a naughty boy, who, ever since his dismissal from Eton, had been perfecting himself in all sorts of objectionable accomplishments. He was pale and thin, and wore a *blasé* air; and prudent chaperons warned their charges against him, as a very dangerous young man. He had, however, his intervals of virtue, and knew how to make himself agreeable in a country house. Some people thought him good-looking, and Scamperly certainly spared no pains towards becoming so. Joubert, his faithful ministrant, used to send him down in the morning, beauti-

LATE LAURELS.

curled, and scented, and hung  
pretty gimcraks, his little soft fingers  
precious stones and quaint devices,  
of many a Bond Street artificer.  
Gerfields looked, hesitated, looked  
their peace of mind irretrievably  
at evening they severally confided  
to their mamma, showed her  
heart, and resolved heroically to  
anyone so agreeable could be as  
principled as people said.  
an, who at heart disliked a rural  
his daughter, piqued himself upon  
reducing its disagreeableness to a  
was not, perhaps, so confirmed a  
roué duke, who could think of no  
on for the dog who bit him, than  
as married and went to live in the  
he regarded provincial no less than  
distaste as a necessary evil, which  
should mitigate as best he could.  
ed no comfort that the most ex-  
s could wish for: his stables were  
riding-horses and pony-carriages  
his command; Gobemouche, the  
d have betrayed an anchorite

into greediness; and the cellars contained treasures of which even Bibo was compelled to speak with affectionate admiration. Day by day the party grew; night by night a larger tableful of guests sat down to appreciate the triumphs of M. Gobemouche's *cuisine*; and yet the Major felt that matters were going heavily. The Miss Dangerfields had sung through their list of duets, and were beginning, he could see, to tire Lord Scamperly with too assiduous attention. Sir Agricola had demonstrated to each new succession of listeners the inevitable catastrophe of a perfidious administration; Bibo's stories were running short; Mrs. Vivien showed symptoms of breaking down, and Florence was already in despair, when, to the great relief of everybody, it was announced that Mr. Slap had a couple of days to spare, and had graciously consented to spend them at Clyffe. The Major gave a great sigh of relief, and felt that his responsibilities as a host were at an end. He had a house full of people on his hands, but the new comer would, he knew, be a guarantee of satisfactory entertainment.

Mr. Slap was a Commissioner of Pumps and Fountains, and a great man in his department. Not half-a-pint of water went astray in the



## LATE LAURELS.

Slap's eagle eye marked the defunct offender, or discerned amendment he made a neat speech as never at a loss for a telling quip, and irrigated the House with copious oratory, which seemed to command, and in as little danger as one of his own waterworks. His editorial efforts, however, were all and literary successes. From his table came more good dinners, and more laughs, than any man of the day. He was in search of a decent parenthetical, and unhesitatingly upon Slap, and upon his reputation as a wag to the great men—the very greatest—to their tables, laughed at his own, and bore the lash of his satire. Fine ladies used to gossip with him, and even the most envenomed malevolence. No one, however, was more brilliant, penetrating, or witty than Slap; and Major Vivien thanked him for coming down to dinner the other evening, and found him already dressed and in the drawing-room. Slap, however, proceeded to make him-

self thoroughly master of the situation, found out who were staying in the house, what time the letters went to the post, how far it was to Pondercast Castle, which of the ministers were shooting there, and what was Sir Agricola's last theme for declamation. Presently the ladies began to assemble, the hungry sportsmen descended to reap the advantage of their morning's walk; dinner was announced. Florence was assigned to Mr. Slap; and the Miss Dangerfields, their thoughts for once abstracted from the object of so many days' pursuit, learned with mingled admiration and surprise how it was that a real London lion ate, drank, and—roared.

The day following, however, even Mr. Slap's arrival was thrown into the shade by that of Erle. He entered the house with the air of a man who was too confident of pleasing to be anxious about his reception, and who was too self-reliant to care for flattery. He was cleverer by far than the people amongst whom he lived, and his superiority betrayed itself by a sarcasm, which was all the more effective for being perfectly well-bred. A long minority had made him just wealthy enough to be idle, and the independence of his youth had trained him into a sort of social gipsy. An old

uncle, whose fortune he was one day to inherit, had discharged the duties of guardianship by keeping him over-supplied with pocket-money, and by securing for him the run of half-a-dozen Belgravian drawing-rooms, where good looks, audacity, lively talk, and satisfactory prospects, won him an easy success. Everything, so his wiser friends consolingly informed him, had gone so well with him, that only a disaster could rescue him from becoming completely contemptible. Erle himself was obliged to acknowledge that the stream of his life had run with uninteresting smoothness, and that he sometimes felt bored with invariable good fortune. At school, he had enjoyed the reputation, precious above everything in a school-boy's eyes, of being able to do anything if he chose, but of preferring occasional brilliancy to the steady lustre which necessitates the drudgery of continued application. At college he was the oracle of a little clique, who repeated his *bons mots*, admired his cynicism, and paid him the flattery of assiduous imitation. He sagaciously declined to enter the lists where eccentric book-worms and hard-headed north-countrymen rode, strong in the might of conscious preparedness, equipped with a formidable panoply of well-fitting

facts and figures; but he won some *éclat* by a neat essay on mediæval art, and established his reputation by a prize poem, in which his admirers hailed the coming laureate of his age, which his enemies pronounced pretty rather than forcible, and which he himself was the first to sneer at, as achieving the appropriate mediocrity of a school exercise. In London, he found that the sort of abilities he possessed were precisely the most available for the purposes towards which his friends' habits and his own ambition combined to lead him. He devoted himself, with more diligence than he had ever yet displayed, to being a fine gentleman; and easy manners, a ready tact, good taste, and an aptitude for gossip, smoothed his way to triumphs, towards which less fortunate aspirants struggled patiently, but in vain. Gradually, and in despite of himself, he grew into a polite impostor; nobody threatened him with detection; the imitation of 'thoroughness' was more than good enough for an indulgent *coterie*, and it was on the verdict of a *coterie* that success seemed at present to depend. He was politician enough to refute a knot of *dilettanti* statesmen, who settled the affairs of the nation (the wrong way, for the most part) in a bay window in



RELS.

enough to lay down the  
the Royal Academy;  
since their mammas of  
enough to waste a little  
that disgraced them-  
which brought up the  
as, and hunters which  
ved fall at Leamington  
Living for little but  
t remained a resolute  
pirant, as she watched  
ked into his sad, dark  
there the secret that  
at the prize was really  
fidious lips were whis-  
confidence into another's  
ng about the room in  
auty, scarcely granted  
gnition. Experienced  
as a desperate case, and  
who always saw every-  
ters to dispose of, told  
hing young man, and in  
lity, gave him the sur-  
et two summers before



in London, had frequented the same houses, danced at the same balls, and ascertained that they liked one another well enough to make the prospect of meeting agreeable. Florence thought him far better company than Mr. Slap, and Erle returned the compliment by speedily displaying an undisguised preference for her society to that of anybody else in the house. Ranging for amusement, he examined his new domain, reassured himself of Sir Agricola's stupidity, sipped a few drops of Mrs. Vivien's stream of gossip, asked Slap for his last *bon mot*, hovered awhile round the prettiest Miss Dangerfield, and settled down upon Florence as his serious occupation.

An easy country house, lovely autumn weather, an experienced love-maker, a beautiful and impressive woman, mutual inclination, favourable opportunity—what need to tell the result? Erle found the shady walks and pleasant garden seats at Clyffe far more to his taste than the crowded staircases and stifling drawing-rooms from which he had just escaped; and Florence, flattered by his homage, and for once thoroughly interested in her companion, startled him by a brilliancy and thoughtfulness of which their London intercourse had given him no suspicion.

# LATE LAURELS.

ertained that he preferred riding  
judging about the stubbles; and  
had been his fag at Eton, and  
completely intimate, declared, over  
night, that, disagreeable as Erle  
never known him in so obstinately  
cynical a mood as his present.  
ations are generally thrown away;  
orning Erle, who had hitherto put  
to the blush, declared that he was  
out, defended himself with languid  
against the charge of idleness, and  
ast to being tired of partridges.  
was on the other side of the table,  
alance of intelligence across it, and  
hout difficulty the almost imper-  
that assured her of his real inten-

tonight was over the inevitable  
evident to every good judge in

amed Captain Bibb, as he and Lord  
settling comfortably down to a  
of billiards, 'I am glad of it. Erle  
of luck; he is over head and  
insolence—he thinks every

woman he looks at is ready to jump down his throat, if he will only open his mouth; and—that's twenty-two to love, Scampy; and a bad stroke even for you.'

'And what?' said his companion, gracefully poising himself on the tips of a little pair of glittering shoes, in the vain attempt to reach an awkwardly-placed ball; 'what is up now, Bibo, that makes you so savage?'

'Savage!' laughed Bibo, contemptuously, as he stopped short in the midst of an attempt to resuscitate a half-extinct cigar. 'On the contrary—never more pleased in my life. Don't you see, Scampy—but of course you're too young and foolish to see anything—but anybody with half an eye might have known that there will be a row here before the end of the week.'

'A row?' cried Scamperly, who, in the innocence of his heart, treated the other's superior sagacity with the profoundest reverence; 'and Erle in it? that beats me, I confess.'

'He is going to burn his fingers—'

'With that confounded Florence!' cried Scamperly, astonished, as the whole truth flashed upon him. 'By George! I hope he will, and burn 'em thoroughly, and like it as much as I did.'



## LATE LAURELS.

wounded pride and sensitive feeling bleeding from the wounds which fate had inflicted; and better people with the recollections of Erle's sacrifice fresh in their memory, might have been not to rejoice in his overthrow. The loss of success is as hard to lose as victory. Scamperly was still incredulous as to the possibility of such a feat.

'A poor fellow,' he said, humbly; 'books, and a little of the science of the profession—he's good at them all, hang it!—but you and me, Bibo; what chance have we? Money's a good thing for something; but with the cleverness of a governess that does it.'

'Governess with her,' said Bibo, sending the ball neatly into the net; 'it's temper—you are well out of it.'

'If she will have him?' said the

'I cried Bibo, with the greatest satisfaction, 'she loves her liberty too well.'

While talking, Erle sauntered into the room. Usually cheerful, impertinent, and confident, he rallied Scamperly on a

stupid speech he had made the night before at dinner; put Bibo into a passion by offering to give him fifteen, and play him for a sovereign, and quite unconsciously prepared the way for an outburst of the latent hostility with which both players regarded him.

‘I shall be happy to play you,’ said Bibo, reddening with offended dignity, ‘on any terms you please; and, if you like, we will have the match after luncheon.’

‘Not I,’ cried Erle; ‘I am going to ride.’

His companions exchanged looks; and Erle, with the sensitiveness of a guilty conscience, saw that there was some secret between them.

‘Oh!’—said Bibo, with the air of a man to whom an entirely satisfactory explanation has been given; while Scamperly re-echoed the exclamation, with the most impertinent emphasis, from the other side of the table.

‘You seem to have a joke,’ Erle said, stiffly; ‘pray do not keep it to yourselves. Scamperly, have you been saying something funny?’

‘Yes,’ said his lordship; ‘I have been wishing you good luck on a journey where better men have failed before you. Bibo, there, thinks you will come to grief.’



'eed!' cried Bibo, from the other end  
 a. 'Bon voyage to you, with all my

e,' said Erle, more than ever provoked,  
 completely mystified. What on earth is  
 all about?'

ha!'—cried Scamperly, in the most  
 ; 'what is it all about, Bibo?'

said Bibo; 'why in the world be so  
 y mysterious? My dear fellow, we  
 us been made fools of in our time,  
 wide awake for your time of life, you  
 ng at the trade, you know.'

my soul!' cried Erle, in a passion, 'you  
 Greek to me; pray be explicit.'

en,' replied Bibo, 'we are glad to see  
 ave found a woman at last who can  
 und her little finger.'

o will turn you off,' cried Scamperly,  
 has had her fun, as she did me—bad  
 '.

he heyday of vanity and self-satisfac-  
 ite taken aback by so unexpected an

frail to answer angrily for fear of  
 uch in earnest.

he faltered in his reply. 'Look

here !' he cried, 'you offered me a bet just now ; here is one for you—a hundred pounds to ten that Miss Vivien has rejected you, within a month from now.'

'Done !' cried Erle, almost before he knew what he was about ; for a moment's hesitation would have betrayed a seriousness of purpose which he had hardly recognised to himself, and which he was anxious above everything to hide from the rest. Did he intend to propose, and would Florence refuse him, if he did ? both uncertainties, and, while uncertain, fair topics for a wager ; so levity whispered in his ear ; but a graver voice told him that he had done a foolish act, and that neither pique nor vanity, nor the affectation of heartlessness, nor endangered prestige, should have betrayed him into a joke, natural enough to an old *roué* like Bibo, but unforgivable in a woman's eyes, and dangerously capable of a profane interpretation.

Erle was, however, enjoying himself far too much, and had, moreover, too hearty a contempt for Bibo, to be deterred by anything that had taken place from following wherever his inclination led him. While Florence listened with a pleased attention, while each day heightened the enjoy-



## LATE LAURELS.

course with her, he could afford to sneers, wishes, and prophecies of the party. So followed all the accidations through which flirtation—long confidential talks, which the third party seemed instantly to check; coincidences of taste and judgment; which were only the pretext for a ; a growing shade of gravity cast merriment of both; interchanged old a world of secrets; accidental in the rest of the party; meetings, be altogether the fruit of chance; tenderness on Erle's part; a secret at on Florence's; earnest protesta- one side, feeble opposition on the before either knew what was hap- earnest, passionate kiss, and the formal proposal.

two latter events, however, a third which effectually spoilt the natural case, and diverted two careers new direction.

ed, and the discovery resulted in miliation that Erle had ever yet



Scamperly, who had, after all, some conscience, and would rather have cut his fingers off than have broken any rule of honour, was the innocent cause of the disaster.

One evening, when the audacity with which Erle conducted his campaign had been the theme of conversation, Scamperly, in a moment of weakness, confided to the younger Miss Dangerfield the story of the bet. Miss Dangerfield, fortunate in the possession of an undeniable piece of gossip, passed it on to her mamma; and Lady Dangerfield, with the good-natured alacrity proper to the retailers of disagreeable intelligence, lost no time in disburdening herself to Mrs. Vivien. Mrs. Vivien treated the matter with affected indifference, thanked her dear friend cordially for her invaluable frankness, but writhed secretly under the indignity which her daughter's indiscretion had rendered possible, and acknowledged to herself the gravity of the crisis, and the necessity for decisive action. She summoned Florence to her room.

Florence, guessing that she was to be lectured, came with an air of quiet, stubborn resignation, which her mother knew, bespoke the most hopelessly impracticable of all her moods.

ELS.

have something dis-  
rode with Mr. Erle  
not?’

d; ‘he is the only  
word to say for him-

him to-night, singing,  
the pianoforte?’

impenitent as ever;  
lay at cards; he and  
the house who dislike

him by accident in

Florence, with pro-  
eed to go, because the  
guing us.’

and neither party had  
ative weapon. Florence  
sness that Erle was as  
ut she was too proud  
ad Lady Dangerfield’s  
like a skilful strategist  
ought it forthwith into  
the day was going

‘You know, of course,’ she said, coolly, ‘the price you pay, and make me pay, for such escapades?’

‘No,’ said Florence, with aroused inquisitiveness; ‘what is it?’

‘People have ears, you know, and eyes.’

‘Yes,’ continued the other belligerent, ‘and tongues—all three dangerous things.’

‘Dangerous indeed!’ said Mrs. Vivien, advancing composedly to the point at which she knew that victory awaited her. ‘You know how good-naturedly people will use all three. Already, I have good reason to know, your follies are the plaything of half the gossips in the county; everybody has a story to tell of you.’

‘*Après?*’ asked Florence, doggedly, for her mother was rapidly putting her into a passion. ‘Suppose that Miss Dangerfield has said something sarcastic about me, or Lord Scamperly has pronounced me a flirt; what then?’

‘It is something worse than that,’ said her mother, drawing the cruel blade, and pressing it remorselessly to what she knew was the tenderest spot in her antagonist’s nature—her fear of ridicule—‘how do you like the idea of all the fops in the house, Mr. Erle among the rest,



LATE LAURELS.

of your good nature? don't you talk? Well, here is a specimen, you know the world. Mr. Erle with Captain Bibb, that he will in a fortnight, and that you shall Lord Scamperly told Lady Danger- to give her three to one against all of course very much amused everybody watches the perfor- everybody expects that Mr. Erle now, dear, good night, and

## CHAPTER III.

## DEFEAT.

——saying that she choked,  
 And sharply turned about to hide her face,  
 Moved to her chamber, and there flung herself  
 Down on the great king's couch, and writhed upon it,  
 And clench'd her fingers, till they bit the palm,  
 And shriek'd out 'traitor' to the unhearing wall;  
 Then flash'd into wild tears, and rose again,  
 And mov'd about the palace, proud and pale.

FLORENCE felt the colour desert her cheek, and with difficulty suppressed the groan of horror and suspense which her mother's revelation called, almost before she was aware, to her lips. Her pride just enabled her, however, to maintain a decent passivity of manner, and to effect a retreat without allowing her mother to see the full amount of the discomfiture which she had inflicted.

'Good night, mamma,' she said, coldly, 'if that is all you have to tell me,' and so escaped, her brain on fire and her heart icy cold, to the solitude



# LATE LAURELS.

ere to give free vent to her pas-  
 ntment, to probe the cruel wound,  
 e a dire revenge. For once she  
 yed into a tender mood, had for-  
 ms of a heartless philosophy, and  
 elieve that love need not be, after  
 pretext of hypocrites, the folly of  
 a polite synonym for the meanest  
 and sale. There had seemed a  
 ess in Erle's behaviour, an evident  
 sometimes a passionate transport,  
 ore than perfidy to have assumed.  
 firmly believed, were for the most  
 would ordinary cold-blooded sel-  
 hocked or surprised her. But here  
 e wickedness, an impudent hardi-  
 nly cruelty, that more than justified  
 her most sceptical mood. Erle  
 he world, was laughed at by his  
 is exceptional innocence, was, with-  
 he best man of the Clyffe party;  
 worse than a villain? Were these  
 he asked herself, to whom people  
 about virtue, honour, propriety—  
 opinions were so worth respecting,  
 it was wrong to shock?—

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LATE LAURELS.

...e, and from the terrace to the garden;  
...ed, with the assurance of one whose  
...longer matter for anxiety, to trans-  
...nite language the confession and re-  
...had been only vaguely hinted at the  
... Florence opened the way for him to  
...stening with a faint smile playing on  
...e he spoke, helped him considerably  
...showed symptoms of distress, smoothed  
...his oration over an occasional im-  
...nd at its end gave a polite, good-  
...ut emphatic 'No.'

...fairly staggered by the unexpected

...really serious?' he said.

...you,' said Florence, looking thoroughly  
...was never more completely in earnest

...Do not give me the distress of re-  
...decision.'

...of anger and disappointment sprang  
...s; his voice, in spite of every effort,  
...nd tremulous; the vanity which the  
...uld have so pleasantly flattered, the  
...would have indulged, had both alike  
...ible stab. It had been great fun to  
...ake fools of other men, but Erle

had no relish for the experiment when tried on himself. Florence, too, despite her protestations of seriousness, had evidently a comic view of the matter in her mind, and Erle shrunk in horror from the agony of being ridiculous.

‘And so you were only amusing yourself,’ he said bitterly, ‘and leading me a wild-goose chase to get rid of a tedious fortnight: is everything, then, a joke to you? How right men are to say that you are heartless!’

‘Do they say so?’ asked Florence, with the most provoking indifference. ‘Terrible accusation!’

‘I say so,’ cried Erle, in a passion: ‘I know it to my cost—I shall feel it all my life. Was I vain, was I wrong to hope? Look back, Miss Vivien, to all that has gone on between us for these weeks past; what meant every look, act, speech of yours and mine, but the one thing which you now tell me is impossible? what meant those pleasant rides, those long conversations, in which I, at least, was not playing the hypocrite? that evident preference you showed me? the confidences which you encouraged? ay, and what meant the kiss that only yesterday sealed, as I hoped, the pledge of something better than a passing whim?’



LATE LAURELS.

cried Florence, reddening at the  
her indiscretion, and turning deadly  
with excitement; 'it meant that I  
to do a very foolish thing, and that  
enough to remind me of it now. I  
of a valuable secret; boast of it to  
ons.'

'Consult me, at any rate,' said Erle, with  
am not so mean as that. You know  
et is safe; I prize it too dearly as a  
to part with it lightly.'

'I have a secret,' said Florence, eagerly;  
s one till yesterday. Do you wish for  
my refusal?—here it is: you began to  
to me for your amusement, and I re-  
should continue it for mine. I know  
er, and I intend you to lose it. Oh,  
heartless am I?—and is everything a  
and is it you who ask it—you who  
the proper playthings for men like  
erly, or Captain Bibb—you who bet  
if we were horses or yachts—you who  
of everything sacred in life—sacred,  
can such a man know what "sacred"

'I could explain it all.'

‘Pray, spare yourself the trouble,’ said Florence; ‘the story has explained itself, and has left no room for apology. Forgive you? never, never! But I do not hate you, as I should have done if I had discovered the trick too late. What, you fancy you love me?’

‘Fancy!’ exclaimed Erle. ‘Oh! how little you know of the feeling.’

‘Excuse me,’ said his companion, ‘but I believe I *do* know a good deal of it, more, at any rate, than yourself. It is ardent at this moment—I can imagine, all the more ardent for being baffled; but I know that you could afford to bet about it a fortnight ago, and that you would be weary of it in a year. I am flattered by your proposal, but you must excuse me for declining to stake my happiness on anything so uncertain.’

‘I am perfectly certain,’ said Erle, resolutely, ‘that no one will ever love you more sincerely than myself.’

‘Possibly,’ replied Florence; ‘and in that case, I shall take good care not to give anyone the chance of making me completely miserable. But you are wrong indeed, Mr. Erle; I have gauged your character, and looked into my own heart. Believe me, we are neither of us lovers, or likely



## LATE LAURELS.

In the first place, you are far too  
with yourself to have any to throw  
people; and in the next place—'

Erle, 'in the next place?'

'In the next place,' Florence said, 'we are far  
from becoming affectionate. Our char-  
acter is the same, and that is why I disapprove  
of my husband's making himself far too little to wish to be  
my husband.'

Erle, insensibly catching something  
of her bantering mood, 'if you are  
to have me, the reason is a handsome  
one; but the pill is a bitter one, even  
with such a compliment as that.'

He exclaimed Florence, vehemently, 'you  
know little of a compliment I intended;  
I have paid you a worse one. But  
I will not be affronted.'

'Not being affronted at anything,' said  
Erle, with resignation. 'Our quarrels always  
end in this way.'

'You, we will be friends,' said Florence,  
*we must* be friends, for fortune seems  
to have brought us together, and our tastes are identical.

She gave him her hand—fair,  
well-chiselled, a very type of profuse

beauty—and Erle made one more desperate attempt for the prize which was slipping from his clutch.

‘Friendly for the present,’ he said. ‘Some day, perhaps, you will change your mind.’

‘Never!’ said his companion, fixedly; and Erle saw that it was in vain to hope.

They had reached a garden gate; Florence passed through it to go to the house. Erle continued his walk alone, irritated, humbled, sad, but, on the whole, less broken-hearted than he felt he ought to be under the circumstances. He fanned his disappointment, but was surprised to find how feeble was the blaze produced. He invoked despair, but life looked provokingly cheerful. Miss Vivien, so an inward voice told him, had not been altogether in the wrong; the experiment would have been a bold one, and might well have failed. He looked at the precipice from which she had turned him, and shuddered at his recent temerity. She was lovely indeed—never more so than this morning—witty, high-spirited, a capital companion, no doubt; but—Erle acknowledged that there was a ‘but,’ and consoled himself with the reflection that her very excellences might have unfitted her for a wife. It was provoking to



## LATE LAURELS.

the chance of adding him to the rejected aspirants. The only thing out; nobody in the house should, see in his demeanour a touch of

‘If she will not love,’ he hummed to

‘Nothing will make her,  
The Devil take her.’

impolite and unloverlike ejaculation by the flower which his companion in her excitement, lit a cigar, found so, laughingly confessed his reverse, ten pounds, and agreed with him in Florence a worthy representative of caprices were unintelligible, whose abounded, and whose conquest, by foul, was the lawful prerogative of of creation.

## CHAPTER IV.

## PLUCKED !

They lost their weeks, they vex the souls of deans,  
They rode, they betted, made a hundred friends,  
And caught the blossom of the flying terms.

WHILE Florence was learning the world and adding to her list of conquests, Margaret was passing quietly through a far less eventful existence. The Manor had come to have more than ever about it the air of a household whose young times are over. Enjoyment still was there ; but it was enjoyment from which melancholy was not remote, and whose temperature hardly ever rose as high as mirth. Once again the Underwood Church had been hung with black, and once more Mr. Evelyn had entered it as chief mourner, to see another inmate added to the many of his family who already lay there. Opening from the windows of a morning room, and built upon the sunniest side of the house, stretched a long conservatory—the latest of the Squire's



—contrived especially for  
 enter walk. But she no longer  
 den-chair stands unused and  
 and her husband, who for  
 to walk beside it, now trudges  
 his step a little faltering, and  
 —a weather-beaten, resolute,  
 man, not without his burthen  
 but bearing his sorrows bravely,  
 is boisterous—decidedly some-  
 more considerate than of old.  
 After his death, Margaret had  
 companion, managed his house,  
 hundred gentle acts, tempted  
 readiness into greater depend-  
 e, and made herself daily more  
 port. His years began to tell.  
 an attack of gout; had turned  
 ers out to grass and sold the  
 quiet stroll with Margaret to  
 quarter sessions, or agricultural  
 with a dignified alacrity each  
 tion for which his lessening  
 im, and was quoted in the  
 t justice, as exhibiting the  
 age. Nelly, far too much

spoilt to be capable of serious effort, and too completely mistress of her grandfather's heart to admit of the scolding which he sometimes knew that she deserved, had been at last sent off to school, and was being there tamed into something like diligence and order. Charles had for years past spent most of his holidays at Underwood. His mother, never cured of continental tastes, had gone once more to live abroad, had formed the acquaintance of a certain M. de Vernet, and had one day introduced him to her son as his stepfather. But the young Englishman could never bring himself to regard his new relation with becoming respect; and there seemed no possible reason for urging him into unwelcome contact with one whose religion, tastes, and politics were—as his mother confessed to herself—by no means advisable models for the future heir of Underwood. His grandfather's house was always open to him; and a schoolboy naturally found the horses, dogs, and guns, the country life, the zealous servants—to say nothing of his cousin's society—a great deal more to his taste than the dull routine of foreign life—promenades, concerts, casinos, visitors whom he knew nothing about, plays that he could scarcely understand, and *diners à la carte*, whose



as he was incapable of appreciating. He  
 with his cousin as with a sister; and the  
 that any other relationship was possible  
 as yet presented itself, either to his mind  
 No sister ever performed her duties  
 more zealous tenderness. When he came  
 Eton in a scrape, Margaret appeased  
 his wrath, put the offender's repentance  
 in its most available shape, and succeeded in  
 about confession on the one side, and  
 as on the other. When he wrote har-  
 descriptions of his small allowance, of M.  
 his parsimonious ideas, of his mother's  
 interest in his fortunes, Margaret used, in  
 indignation, to convince her grandfather  
 necessity of keeping boys well supplied, and  
 sent off a surreptitious sovereign of her  
 way of meeting some exceptional emer-  
 The two cousins grew extremely confi-  
 and Charles, who was a sentimental lad,  
 his heart to a congenial companion,  
 trusted all his most cherished secrets to her  
 Year by year their intimacy became  
 complete, and their companionship, if some-  
 constrained, decidedly more pleasur-  
 Nelly's difference of age

before.



seemed greater than it was, and effectually excluded her from the friendship of the other two. They looked upon her as a child, petted and humoured her, anticipated and indulged her caprices, but discussed her character between themselves, and never admitted her to an equality; nor did she ever interest herself in their communications, or seem to wish to overstep the barrier which the circumstances of the case had raised up between them.

The Squire, who was a great believer in early marriages, and who thought both his grandchildren, far too good for anybody but one another, regarded their deepening friendship with undisguised satisfaction, and looked upon them as already impliedly betrothed. Neither of the parties concerned, however, entertained any such view of the matter. They sincerely liked one another; but in Margaret's mind at least the liking had assumed no definite shape, and in Charles's none but the most hazy outline. Margaret was little accustomed to speculate about herself, and scarcely knew her own feelings with any precision. Charles loved his cousin, but feeling himself still a boy, and being of the sort of temperament that is ingenious in suggesting

LATE LAURELS.

immediate action, gladly allowed to interpose a long chapter of life between present love and his future wife. Not yet over; and college done, he had been settled, to go into the army. He was to see the world; and his imagination was not profound enough to blind him to the advantages of an unfettered existence. He had been in London, and had a vague idea of the pleasures which society might have in store for him. He pictured to himself, in a dreamy way, the possibilities of enjoyment—the adventures of travel, the excitement of a campaign, the novelty of foreign cities, the friendship of new men, the companionship of amusing women. In none of these day-dreams had a place. It was natural to wish for a more attractive colouring. He would have liked to go to the heart to see anyone else love a wife, but he had for the present no other resource for his own.

The influence of the two betrayed the growth of his character, and the sort of career he was probably destined. Charles's undecided mouth bespoke the

intermittent impulsiveness of a sentimentalist, who had made but little effort towards self-discipline; a more careful scrutiny might have revealed the selfishness which an habitual yielding to moods engenders, and the blindness to other persons' feelings which is the common defect of unimagi-native natures. But his eyes were full of tenderness and goodhumour, his smile was frank and cordial, his brow was chiselled with a delicate softness, and a light down, which had never known the razor, crept in faint outline about his mouth and neck, and added at once to the comeliness of his appearance and to the indistinctness of the impression which it left upon the beholder. .

Margaret, on the contrary, stamped her likeness in clear outline upon the recollection of all who saw her. Nature here had suffered no waste of material. She was slight in form, but its perfect symmetry gave beauty, vigour, and dignity to her movements. Her clear brown eyes lit up with a sudden fire, or dilated with wonder, or melted with infinite tenderness, and in every case alike were full of meaning. Light hair, delicate rather than abundant, encircled her forehead with a sort of halo, such—so ran Charles's dream in his imaginative moments—as hangs above the heads



LATE LAURELS.

18 yrs. Her taper neck was set on  
resolution that gave a character  
clearance, and announced her, in  
ar to be mistaken, as of heroic  
o or to suffer, the chosen vessel  
ft, or the instrument of some  
Charles might well grow senti-  
olidays closed, and the time for  
se at hand. Every change dis-  
this one most of all; for days  
lung over him, and the thought  
on his mind would betray itself  
zeal, a readier chivalry, and a  
spoken tenderness than could well  
the intercourse of every day.  
nd say, 'for one more walk with  
evergreens, you best, and kindest,  
ousins. How many of the poor  
shall meet to-morrow will be  
at a home, as dear a companion?'  
ld indulge in a little private cry  
and would try in vain to make  
at the Manor was as agreeable  
quire as good a companion, or  
ty, or the sun as bright, or life  
worth the having, as when

shared with the friend whose image was already stamped deep upon her heart.

Two winters after the events recorded in the last chapter, Charles found himself unexpectedly at home, and at home under circumstances as little pleasant as expected.

This was how it happened. Charles's college, St. Faith's, had been for some time falling into worse and worse disorder. A crisis was felt to be impending; good judges of academical atmosphere had long predicted a storm. For weeks past the Dean's face had been growing longer and darker; morning chapel had been attended by lessening numbers; discipline had been everywhere infringed; men had 'knocked in' at the most unconscionable hours; no serious outrage had been committed, but a host of petty misdemeanours were gradually filling the cup of official wrath to the point at which an overflow was inevitable. The Dons held a council, acknowledged the emergency, and resolved upon a *coup d'état* at the first favourable opportunity. Still the evil grew. One night a chorus of hilarious youths surrounded the President's windows, and greeted that functionary, who divided his nights between archæological research and the perusal of the College Statutes, with a performance



# LATE LAURELS.

'a Dunk,' a great deal more noisy

On another occasion an early  
rew a great deal of compulsory  
hunting men's hands, and afforded  
tunity of blockading all the pas-  
th's, and confining the Dons to  
ers for half a day. The interests  
ng' went, of course, to the wall;  
who assembled for college lectures  
on to the red-coated crows who  
anting mornings, or the boisterous  
re the accidents of the day were  
to the night, over flowing rivers of  
mulled claret. Charles had two  
and worked them with the unscru-  
ce of twenty. Everybody admitted  
as too good to last; and so it was.  
before the Christmas vacation the

h, there was a public examination,  
urs prevailed as to the manner in  
Faith's men had acquitted them-  
ormidable ordeal. Day after day,  
pper was disposed of, the victims  
of their experience, were thunder-  
w much they did not know, and



tried in vain to support one another's flagging courage. At last, impudence itself refused to take a hopeful view of the position, and intrepidity lapsed quickly into despair. Some of the least resolute 'scratched,' preferring a decent retreat to the disaster, which was now all but inevitable. The St. Faith's tutors gathered in silent indignation to the battle-field, where their ill-trained combatants were daily succumbing with disgraceful readiness before the onslaught of three ruthless examiners. The President himself sat by, pale with horror at the bathos of ignorance, into which the plummet was lowered, and lowered again, and still without the discovery of any solid bottom. Pity, wrath, contempt, vengeance, swept by turns across the usually placid lineaments of his face, and portended an awful doom to such of the defaulters as fell within the scope of his outraged authority. At last, when Evelyn was called upon, and extemporized a wild translation of a chorus in the *Agamemnon*, the President could endure it no longer, and with an audible ejaculation of 'Eheu!' swept in silence and anger from the scene of action. Blacker and blacker still the storm was gathering around, and next day the thunder-cloud burst. Neither the discomfiture of

LAURELS.

prospect of humiliation  
men from the field. There  
meet, a noisy breakfast, a  
dures; a first-rate run had  
the highest spirits; a hos-  
temporised a luncheon;  
grown into something  
spinning home as fast  
d carry him, and had just  
college gates, with scratched  
mud-encrusted boots and  
me up and handed him a  
een sent by the Dean to  
r. Evelyn is desired to  
th at the Dean's rooms.'  
"forthwith" is the word,  
is desired—by Jove, I'll  
—take my whip, and give  
s.' A pile of those un-  
re lying in the porter's  
one over his pink coat,  
erful audacity across the  
n's. In another moment  
erior: the two combatants  
other, and each saw what  
an ever for a fight. The

Tutor hated horses and 'horsey' people, thought a scarlet man only less atrocious than the scarlet woman of theology, and regarded top-boots as the very insignia of rebellion. He saw, moreover, that the truant was dropping mud as he came, and was running his spurs into the Turkey carpet. Charles, on the other hand, thought that the Dean had never looked so dyspeptic, so unmanly, or so uncomfortable before: the air of the room was close and heavy, and implied an unwholesome antipathy to open windows; the Dean's wan cheek and rounded shoulders told of the midnight oil and a too assiduous devotion to the early Fathers; the table was ornamented with green baize—and all wore the air of a place at which intellectual, rather than material pleasures were wont to be enjoyed. An angular saint, an uninteresting Madonna, and a serious portrait of the founder of the college, adorned the walls, and added to the austere solemnity of an apartment already sufficiently uninviting.

Charles was more excited than he was aware; and the idea of the Dean's punctilious observance of College regulations, and of the deep reverence with which he regarded them, fretted him into an impertinent humour. Accordingly, the battle



# LATE LAURELS.

Dean put down the volume of St. which he had been spending the it up his eye-glass to enable him to ate the whole horror of the spectacle, nned the intruder from head to foot, ok of indignant amazement, and at ut, 'Mr. Evelyn!' Charles was not elined to feel modest, and bore the r perfect composure. His silence other to continue: 'What can you said, 'by appearing—by presuming ore me in a costume—of which the an be said is that it is indelicate, delicate, sir?'

made no effort to conceal his smile. 'sir?' he replied, in affected ignorance s meaning.

'Improper dress, sir,' said the Dean; 'proper in the world for you just now; of course, why you are summoned. ask, Where have you been?'

ous sprite was hovering at Charles's pted a reply which, though entirely ot calculated to appease the Tutor's

*Waterperry Brook,' he said, look-*

ing down at his splashed garments and the deep purple of his skirts. 'I was desired to come to you forthwith, or I should have changed my clothes.'

The Dean's indignation was no longer to be restrained or dissembled. He got up from his chair, laid his hand on the closed volume of St. Cyprian, gathered himself together for an oratorical effort, and proceeded to pour out the vials of his wrath.

'This is an outrage,' he said, 'a deliberate outrage. Mr. Evelyn, a Common-room will be held upon you to-morrow, and I give you no encouragement to be hopeful about its results. You will be dealt with as you deserve, unsparingly. Your career has been a dark one; you have disgraced the college and yourself in the schools. The President very nearly had a fit after hearing your disgraceful performance in the *Agamemnon*. You have resolutely turned your back upon my Critical Exegesis; you have been correspondingly neglectful of my lecture on the Heresies of the first two centuries; and you have not been to morning chapel since—since' (the Dean ran his finger up the damning column of non-attendance, and turned round to confront his victim with the newly-discovered iniquity)–

.

‘since—I declare, only twice the whole term. It is monstrous, sir, and a common-room can alone meet your case. Meantime you will consider yourself confined within the college walls.’

‘I have not dined,’ said Charles, doggedly; ‘I can get nothing from the Buttery, and provisions are not allowed to be brought into college.’

‘That,’ said the Dean, ‘is a matter upon which I have no desire to enter. Good evening, sir.’

‘Do you mean that I am to go without dining, after hunting all day?’ cried Charles, in a passion.

‘I mean nothing but what I say,’ answered the Dean, with provoking composure. ‘Good evening, sir.’

The last ‘good evening’ had much more of command than of friendship in its tones. Charles stalked out of the room, strode across the quadrangle, threw down the offending robe in the porter’s lodge, and in half an hour was re-enacting the scene for the benefit of a very convivial assembly at ‘The Mitre.’

‘Here,’ shouted some one, ‘bring some more champagne. Gentlemen, a toast! “The Dean of St. Faith’s! and the first two centuries!”’ ‘The Dean of St. Faith’s,’ shouted another reveller;



‘dirt, piety, and asceticism!’ ‘With all the honours,’ cried a third; and thereupon, with great clashing of glasses, spilling of wine, and hammering of the table, began a time-honoured chorus:—

Let wine and friendship grace the board,  
Let Bacchus’ bounteous gifts be poured,  
And he who doth their charms deny,  
Down among the dead men, Let Him Lie!

The ascending vehemence of the song had reached its climax, the crash of voices was roaring its loudest, the feast was at its effervescent point, and the Dean of St. Faith’s name upon twenty noisy lips, when the door opened, a polite young man, whose velvet trappings announced his dignity, stepped quietly from the passage; a background of sturdy ‘lictors’ cut off all hopes of flight or resistance; a solemn pause checked the banqueters in mid career; and the proctor’s request was heard without the least interruption. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘I will trouble you for your names and colleges.’

A few days afterwards Charles set off for his home, and several other young gentlemen set off for theirs, exiled by the gentle severity of Alma Mater from the scene of their temptations and



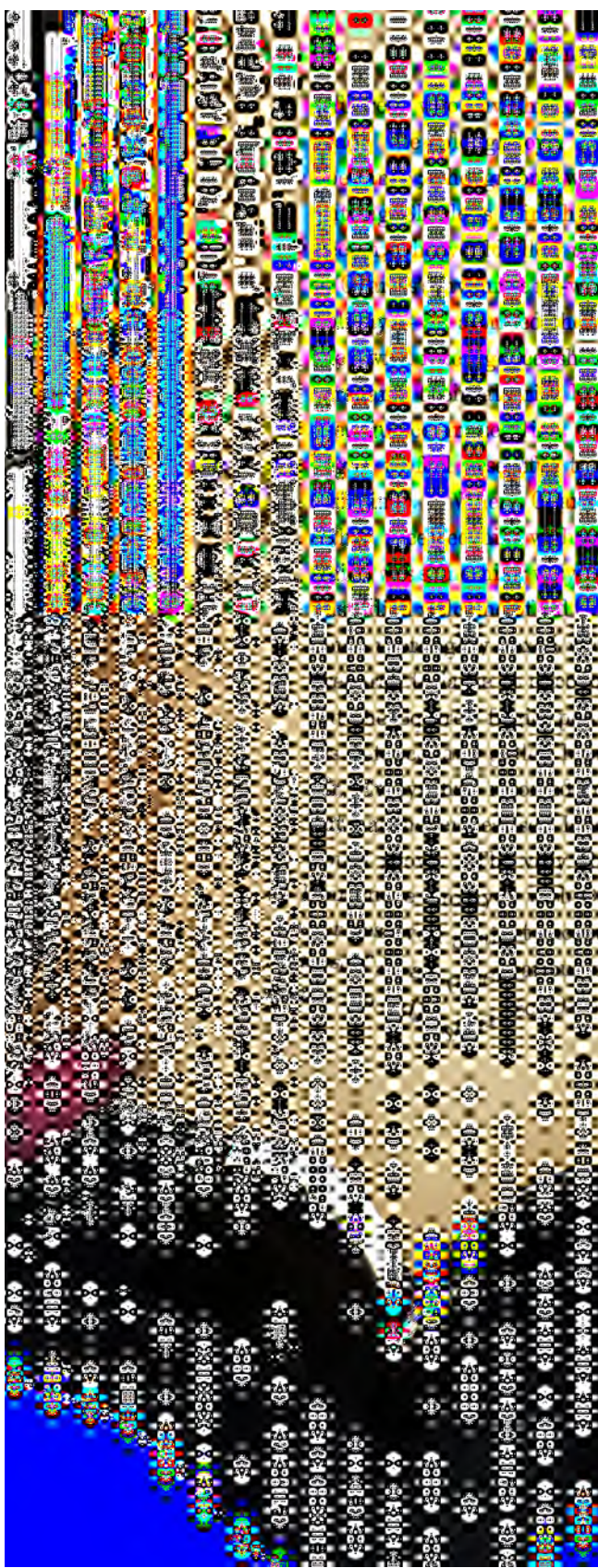
## CHAPTER V.

## THE FATTED CALF.

En amour les résolutions héroïques sont toujours celles qu'on adopte, parcequ'elles sont impossibles à tenir. On les prend, et l'on satisfait à sa conscience ; on les abandonne, et l'on contente sa faiblesse ; on se persuade que l'on a cédé à la force des choses.

MR. EVELYN was excessively annoyed, and resolved to show it. An indignity seemed to have been offered to the whole family when its representative had been subjected to so public a disgrace. The Squire's views on the subject were indistinct, and the indistinctness added to his distress. He endured his humiliation with stoical dignity, but still with secret pangs. He felt sure that the butler, standing solemnly behind him, knew all about it, and had discussed his young master's predicament in the house-keeper's room : he felt abashed before the parson of the parish, whose son had gone up as a Bible Clerk, and had just come out with flying honours : the little





RELS.

ling courtesies in the  
o scraped a bashful  
came to know about  
ter into training; the  
pheasant to be touched  
d before the Christmas  
quire's suspicions, lest  
ld have come to their  
only the result of re-  
He suffered, and he  
ards the cause of his  
arrived, his grand-  
ceremonious urbanity,  
ferent from the hearty,  
es. Charles had come  
h his proceedings, and  
to amicable penitence;  
teness threw him upon  
into secret rebellion.  
show his displeasure,  
difficult a business it  
difficulty, however, made  
Charles, and more than  
mbing. He entrenched  
ut chilling hospitality,  
rd, and ignored com-

pletely the circumstances of the prodigal's return. Charles, on his part, secretly fired up at an unlooked-for severity, steeled his heart against the implied reproach, grew more and more stubbornly deferential, and made his grandfather's existence a burthen to him. The longer such a state of things is maintained, the less tolerable does it become. Two days passed wearily away, and Charles began to think that rustication was, after all, a severer penalty than it was the fashion to consider it. As the excitement of his arrival wore off, and the topics of indifferent conversation came to an end, the freezing embarrassment increased. Mr. Evelyn was in despair, and secretly resolved that Charles ought to go forthwith and visit his mother at Wies-Baden. That evening, fortunately, Mr. Blake, the Underwood clergyman, came to dinner, and prevented the discomfort of a *tête-à-tête*. Even here, however, the unfortunate Oxford escapade followed its weary victims relentlessly, and uneasy consciences kept a sad watch behind affected mirth. Mr. Blake was something of a pedant, and lost no opportunity of airing a little stock of learning, for which, it must be confessed, he found but rare opportunities at the Manor House. The arrival of the

eldest son of the family from Oxford seemed an occasion deserving of a more than ordinary display; and, as if under the impression that Oxonians were in the habit of addressing one another in the dead languages, the worthy divine thought fit to season his remarks to Charles with an appropriate admixture of classical quotation. It pleased his vanity to show his patron and his patron's heir that a country parson might stand on a vantage-ground to both in academical accomplishments. Years before he had tutorised Charles's father at St. Faith's, and he was now genuinely inquisitive to hear about his old college. In vain the Squire, increasingly nervous at every fresh inquiry, endeavoured to give the conversation another bent: in vain he asked after the sick people, the newly-arrived babies, the chancel improvements—all generally the most seductive themes to his clerical tormentor, Mr. Blake, serenely unconscious of the annoyance he was causing, stuck constantly to his subject, and gradually worked his way towards the dreaded discovery. 'Ah,' he said to Charles, 'it is we remote clergy who learn to value our Oxford days: one lays in a store to last one through a tedious lifetime. What pleasant days they were! what excellent companionship!



what noctes cœnæque defūm! Look what literature does for a man! but store his mind with that, and he can defy solitude, hard work, uncongenial tasks—it is his friend, his faithful companion—pernoctat nobiscum, peregrinatur, rusticatur—'

A bomb-shell alighting on the dining-table could scarcely have produced a more electrical effect than did this awful word. The Squire gave a groan in spite of himself, and so nearly upset the claret-jug in his confusion, that the parson's oration came to a premature close. Margaret came mercifully to the rescue, and banished St. Faith's from the conversation for the rest of dinner time. Afterwards they played at whist; but the Squire was testy and negligent, trumped his partner's good cards, made a palpable revoke, and evidently had his head full of something else, and that something of a disquieting and provoking nature. Charles was to hunt the next day; and Mr. Evelyn looked forward with a sense of relief to the prospect of his departure, and to the opportunity which it would afford him of indulging in low spirits without fear of interruption. Both of the belligerents were suffering in the encounter, and both confided their troubles

to Margaret. She, meantime, had seen that matters were not righting themselves, and watched the right moment for successful intervention. She took Charles off into her room, cured him, by her cheerful gentleness, of his sulky mood, made him wheel round the sofa and make up the fire, and in ten minutes had heard all the history of the disaster.

‘After all, then,’ she said, with an air of the greatest relief, ‘there is not anything so very disgraceful, or so very wrong?’

How pleasantly an argument goes on when both parties are longing for the same conclusion. Charles burst out laughing. ‘Disgraceful!’ he cried; ‘why, Margaret, it is a statistical fact that two-thirds of all the men who go in for examinations get plucked before they have done.’

‘And get rusticated?’ inquired Margaret, innocently.

The rustication was a mistake; Charles was obliged to acknowledge—‘a stupid mistake;’ and then he told her of his interview with the Dean, and of the hunting dinner at the ‘Mitre,’ and of the untimely arrival of the authorities. He was just in the middle of the Dean’s toast when there came a knock at the door, and in walked the

Squire, very much disconcerted to find his place on Margaret's sofa forestalled, and the sympathy he was so much in need of bestowed on another. Charles, of course, stopped short in his narrative, and Margaret, with great presence of mind, took advantage of the opportunity.

'Grandpapa,' she said, as she gave him his favourite chair, 'here is Charlie wanting to make his confession to you; and I don't think it is a very dreadful one. Tell him about it, Charlie; it was all those stupid proctors' fault for coming in at the wrong moment.'

'It was the divinity that floored me, sir,' said Charles, making his way with creditable sagacity to the most defensible portion of his case. 'I had done pretty well all through, and my tutor told me I should have got a second; but they got me upon the Gnostics.'

'The who?' asked the Squire, who was not at all learned in Church history, and knew little about heretics, except what he heard occasionally on Sunday mornings.

'Gnostics, sir,' said Charles; who, since his defeat, had been getting up the tenets of that sect, and was only too happy to turn his knowledge



second century, and

quire, who began to  
ight to have known  
doubt that Margaret  
them.'

could do no such  
bit at Charlie's not  
about the Dean—  
evening."

gave his story as  
ge authorities in as  
d in the end made  
er. All three felt  
reconciliation, and  
d Margaret for the  
ker between them.  
o forgive. He still  
n a day's hunting  
hly considerations,  
art of his own flesh  
after all, a piece of  
or had been wrong,  
easy to pass to the  
gles had been right.  
asant familiar talk,

which for days past had seemed almost dry, began to flow again; and Charles, delighted to throw off the icy reserve in which he had been locked, became more than ever cheerful, gracious, and affectionate.

‘Well,’ said the Squire, as he rose at last to go away, ‘we must not starve you, at any rate, when you come home from hunting to-morrow. By the way, Charlie, you are going to ride the little chestnut, but you must be content not to press her, please; for, you remember, they did not expect you in the stables for a month to come.’

‘I will take care, sir,’ said Charles, with a blush; ‘I dare say we shall be only cantering from one wood to another.’

‘That will be just the thing for her,’ said the Squire. ‘And now, Margaret, you had better break up your court, and send us both away to bed.’

Charles lingered behind and bade his cousin a tender good-night. ‘You are my good genius,’ he said, taking her hand kindly. ‘How pleasant to be in trouble, and to be rescued by you! What strange spell is it that you charm us with? Come now, you are a magician, are you not?’





is my cell,  
ess. Escape,  
e I blow out  
he dark with  
velve o'clock.

passage, and  
den and irre-  
companion's  
stirring voice  
levation lifts  
nes you; her  
will; dare to  
y now.' Was  
by Charles's  
ing his hand  
so something  
s crisis. How  
heart throbbed  
alf trembling  
aid the inward  
; the prize is  
asp it.'  
st inspiration.  
to obey, once  
warning voice



spoke, this time in terms of vehement, contemptuous upbraiding. 'Faint heart,' it said, 'waverer, poltroon, act now or never act again! awake from your idle dream of love, or sleep on for a disgraced and miserable lifetime; rise, or be for ever fallen; dare, or reap a coward's meed! The golden fruit hangs close within your reach; pluck it, pluck it while you can!'

He had only a few seconds as he followed her to make up his mind. A dozen yards more and their paths would diverge to different parts of the house. But no; once again fortune favoured him. Margaret recollected a note that she had left unwritten, turned suddenly short, met her cousin face to face, told him with a laugh of her mistake, and went back to her sitting-room. 'Follow,' cried the voice, louder now, more vehement, more reproachful, less mistakeable than ever: 'Coward that you are to doubt: if for failure, what risk better worth the running? If for success, how almost divine a prize! Still doubting? Weak, indolent, spiritless wretch!—act—act! clutch your good fortune while you may. Have you a spark of manhood, a drop of hero's blood in your veins, a touch of greatness? Away with unmanly timidity. Now is the crowning moment. There lies

your promised land, dreamed of, longed for, well-beloved; enter and possess it, or be eternally outcast.'

Charles stood for an instant irresolute, the toy of conflicting waves of passions that tossed him hither and thither. At last his weaker nature triumphed. 'I will ask her to-morrow,' he said, and turned away, his nerves overstrung and his pulse still fluttering wildly, to his bedroom, uncomfortably conscious—though he strove against it—that he had failed; that he had been tried and found wanting, that an encounter had been declined; a fair chance thrown away; that the treasure he feebly longed for was less than ever his. 'To-morrow,' he thought, but when do the to-morrows of dreamers ever come? When does the flagging interest, once indulged with a needless delay, again wax vigorous enough for the prompt deed, the perilous venture, the life and death struggle? When does the prosperous wave of fortune's tide, once allowed to pass, again run in our favour? Charles's conscience smote him ruthlessly, and banished each plausible excuse. At last he slept, and visionary shapes moved sadly about him, pointing a finger of scorn, urging him, with despairing vehemence, to act, or hissing out—

‘Fool! idler! coward!’ as they turned away and left him to his fate.

Meanwhile, the Squire and Margaret had gone to bed with lighter hearts than for days past; and the next morning the good effects of peace were discernible in the unusual cheerfulness that reigned at breakfast. Mr. Evelyn was in the highest spirits, insisted upon driving his grandson to the meet, and discussed the county gossip, the horses which they passed on the road, and the probabilities of the day’s sport, with infectious animation. Charles banished all thoughts of self-reproach, and threw himself eagerly into the spirit of the occasion.

‘Here are the Clyffe people,’ said the Squire, as they turned a corner on the road, and Florence appeared at the head of a little cavalcade, dividing her attention between a fidgety horse and a train of talkative admirers. ‘That is Florence Vivien in front! she is the best rider and the fastest talker, and—to some people’s taste—the handsomest young lady in the county; and they say she makes a goose of every man who comes near her: so be warned in time.’

‘Never fear,’ said Charles, with a laugh, secretly vowing that that should be his last day of bachelor-



hood; 'she seems too well supplied to need additional worshippers.'

'Margaret does not like her in the least,' said the Squire; 'we have merely exchanged visits since they came back from Italy, where, among other fine arts, she acquired that of flirtation.'

Presently Charles got his horse, and joining the Clyffe party, found himself in the midst of friends. Anstruther, an old Etonian, now in the Guards, and the freshest of Florence's conquests, was ever by her side; and near them followed Erle, whose acquaintance Charles had made at All Souls, where both had been frequent guests. 'Evelyn!' they both cried out, as they recognised him. Charles was forthwith introduced to Florence, and soon found himself, like everyone else, entirely at his ease. Florence's court had at any rate the recommendation that it was always lively. 'Charlie Evelyn,' said Erle; 'and on a pretty, plump little thoroughbred, who is quite certain to give him a roll before the day is over. Count Malagrida,' he said, turning round to a handsome-looking man who rode behind him, 'you were asking me about Oxford yesterday; here is Mr. Evelyn, who will give you all the latest news: make the most of

your time, for you will not see much of one another, I guess, when the run begins.'

Count Malagrida, distinguished as the possessor of a black silky moustache, a pair of gloomy languid eyes, a large fortune, and an extremely bad reputation, had formed the Vivien's acquaintance two winters before at Rome, had improved it assiduously during the previous season, professed himself a great admirer of Florence, and had now taken Clyffe in the course of a hunting tour. He was quite at home in English society, talked the language admirably, affected English tastes, rode the best horses that were to be had for love or money, and was acknowledged, even by the Heavyshire connoisseurs, to ride them well—well, that is, for an Italian.

He now greeted Charles with a pleasant frankness, asked him about the woods they were about to draw, and declared himself in love with the Heavyshire country. Charles, in the grasp of a composed and penetrating nature, was too much fascinated to observe his cold sardonic lips, the gloom which settled on his features as his artificial smile died away, or the wrath which flashed ominously from his eye, when for an instant his horse turned restive. A judge of physiognomy, however

would have read 'villain' plainly written in every lineament of his face.

Charles was less pleased with Erle's appearance. He had not certainly improved since the old college days. The lines of his face, somewhat too finely cut for a man in the first instance, had become almost feminine in their delicacy, and gave him the aspect of an invalid. His attitudes and movements bespoke the languor of indifference, and his indifference was especially ostentatious, Charles thought, in his behaviour to Miss Vivien. His adventure with Florence two years ago had not, one might fancy, tended to improve his character. She had accused him of levity, and it was easy enough to deserve the accusation; for once he had felt fond of a woman, and she had rejected him in the manner least agreeable to his vanity; she had criticised his character, and pronounced him unfit. He had attempted sentiment, and found his attempt, not indeed scorned, but accepted with a good-natured, condescending scepticism. Henceforward, in matters of sentiment, he became more than ever of a sceptic himself. His rejection was known to all, and he found his best course was not to attempt concealment, but to laugh at it and himself. It was a boyish indis-



cretion, with which he could afford to be thoroughly amused. Constantly meeting Florence, never having become estranged, getting to know her better and approve her less, a strange sort of intimacy had grown up between them. They openly professed, and to a certain degree felt, a mutual dislike, but found each other very good company. Everybody knew that they were people who had thought of love, and having abandoned the idea, could speak of it without reserve. Either alluded to the breach with perfect unconcern; and both said things about it and themselves which shocked quiet people, and convinced the world that the one was palpably hard-hearted and the other the reverse of modest.

Presently the others moved away, and Erle and Evelyn found themselves riding on either side of Florence.

'The last time we met,' Florence said, 'I think you proposed to me, and gave me a rose, and swore eternal fidelity.'

Charles blushed, looked extremely bashful, and said, as gallantry bid him, that he remembered perfectly.

Erle turned up his eyes, and gave a little mock sigh, inaudible to all but Florence. 'Ils n'en

mourraient pas tous, mais tous étaient frappés,' he said. 'What a list of conquests since then! And how many years ago, Miss Vivien, was that?'

'A hundred and fifty,' answered Florence; 'when Mr. Evelyn and I were young and innocent, and such wicked people as you were never dreamt of.'

Presently there came a great tootooing from a distant horn, wild screams from the corner of the wood, ploughboys gesticulating in the horizon, a sudden movement among the crowd of horses, a mad jumping in and out of the covert on the part of excited whips, a general rush for the only gate out of the field—and Major Vivien threw down his cigar, put his horse into a sharp gallop, and called out to the group of talkers that the fox had gone away. Erle, who was a keen sportsman, and did not like Florence near well enough to care about opening gates for her, made instantly for a formidable stile, and got off with the huntsman and those fortunate two or three who always happen to be on the right side of the wood. Charles looked ruefully at his horse's streaming coat, and already panting sides. Anstruther rode by Florence's side, admiring her horsemanship, leading at the doubtful jumps, and wishing devoutly that

he could get a fall in her service. A burst of ten minutes shook off the loose array of spectators and idlers, who had gathered round the meet, and already foreshadowed the several fortunes of the day. Florence, who always rode as if for her life, was galloping rather wildly over the crest of a smooth upland meadow, her gentleman in due attendance, and her groom three-quarters of a field behind. Major Vivien had pushed his horse down into a lane which he knew must be crossed, and was trotting leisurely on, while the fox was being hurried through a gorse on the hill-side. Erle and a handful of hard riders were following close alongside of the hounds, and were congratulating themselves upon being in for a good run. Charles, enveloped in a cloud of steam and foam, and oblivious of his grandfather's injunctions, was getting the last half mile out of his labouring chestnut, and was sorrowfully meditating a premature return. His reflections were suddenly cut short by Florence flying past him, her horse's head high in the air, and her own attention apparently devoted to the fast-vanishing pack. A thin, straggling, unsuspicious-looking fence separated them from the adjoining field, and Florence, her blood by this time at boiling-point, went at it as hard as



ever she could. Two strides off, her horse half swerved away; her ready hand pulled him straight, a lash from her whip sent him rushing wildly at the opposing barrier: a strong limp bough caught his legs as he flew across, and in another instant both he and his mistress were rolled over into a nice, soft ploughed field beyond. Charles concentrated the chestnut's remaining energies into a single effort, and was soon at the fallen Amazon's side. Anstruther galloped back in great alarm, and was on his legs in an instant. Florence sprang up unassisted, and as quickly subsided, turning deadly pale.

'It is nothing, I assure you,' she said, ruling her face to a smile, which scarcely disguised her pain—'pray, both of you go on this minute.'

'My horse's lungs make it impossible for me to obey,' said Charles. 'I am already at a dead stand-still; besides, I am afraid you are hurt.'

'Well,' said Florence, 'Mr. Anstruther, at any rate, I insist—'

'And I obey orders,' said Anstruther, who, though a lady's man, was beginning to feel nervous about the hunt, 'and I leave you in safe hands.'

So saying, he jumped on his horse, and was pre-

sently out of sight. Florence, sitting in the mud, looked as queen-like as possible, and invested her predicament with a grace and dignity of its own.

‘How extremely embarrassing!’ she said, with a laugh; ‘but, Mr. Evelyn, pray take my groom’s horse, and go on; yours will do perfectly well for him to follow me home.’

Charles, looking at the fallen goddess, very much preferred the idea of a *tête-à-tête* with her to the faint chance of catching the hounds, and resolutely refused the offer.

‘Indeed,’ he said, ‘you must let me see you safe to Clyffe. Shall we send for a carriage?’ For Florence seemed still immovable.

‘Not for the world,’ she cried; ‘my mother would be frightened out of her wits; and besides, it is nothing. If you would help me up, I think that I could manage now.’

Florence was soon safe on her horse again: it cost her some pain, as Charles could see; but she disavowed it bravely, laughed about her own bad riding, and, as the two rode quietly homewards, the conversation naturally took a confidential turn. Florence could be extremely agreeable, and just now she was quite inclined to please. She was gratified at having caught a new admirer;

Anstruther was so innocently dull, Erle was too familiar to be amusing, Malagrida was unassailable, Charles looked bright and susceptible and entertaining, and Florence carried him off joyfully, as an energetic spider does some little fly, for the purposes of home consumption. She flattered him by her inquisitiveness, heard about school and college, found out a number of common acquaintances, gave him the cleverest accounts of their foreign expeditions, and presently began to talk to him about his cousins.

‘I have seen Miss St. Aubyn only once,’ she said—‘at the County ball—we have always missed each other when we went to call. I suppose she is at the Manor?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Charles; ‘and Nelly is to come to-night. You must remember her, a little child?’

‘Yes,’ said Florence, ‘a very pretty little child, with soft brown hair, and the most capital eyes. And has she turned out a beauty?’

‘I have not seen her for three years,’ said her companion. She had to be sent to school, and I was away in her holidays; Margaret, however, considers her loveliness itself.’

‘I must come and judge for myself as soon as possible,’ said Florence, inwardly making up her



mind to like Nelly a great deal better than her sister.

At the Clyffe Lodge they met Mrs. Vivien, and Florence explained away her accident, introduced Charles to her mother, and all three went in to lunch. There were plenty of non-hunters in the house. Florence's fall aroused the greatest interest, conversation flowed pleasantly along, and presently the Major, who did not care about an afternoon's run, came in. By six o'clock most of the party were reassembled and chatting round the drawing-room fire. Charles found himself pressed to stay; Miss Vivien, in particular, would not hear of his departure.

'Think of your poor horse, no doubt just beginning to recover! Papa, Mr. Evelyn jumped after me, and saved my life. I hope you appreciate the heroism. Mr. Anstruther, on the contrary, galloped away, and left me to my fate.'

'You told me to do so,' cried Anstruther, blushing at so sudden an attack.

'We do not always choose to be obeyed,' said Erle. 'How unfortunate that I was six fields away, and had no opportunity of interpreting your wishes!'

'But in your case,' said Florence, with a laugh,

‘I should have wished to be obeyed; you are the last person in the world to see one in misfortune. Mr. Anstruther, I know, would have sympathised; you would have been hypocritically polite.’

‘Hypocrisy, you know,’ said Erle, ‘is a tribute to virtue, and politeness is at any rate better than nothing. Anstruther deserved to tumble into the brook, as he did, for deserting you in distress.’

‘I was not the least in distress—I was very comfortable in the mud; and Mr. Evelyn and I had a great deal to tell one another about.’

‘I congratulate both sincerely,’ said Erle, with a somewhat disrespectful laugh. ‘Thirteen miles I think you had to ride; I should have been at my wits’ end for something to say before we were half way home.’

‘And so should I,’ cried Florence. ‘How lucky that you always lose sight of me on hunting mornings!’

Dinner was announced; Florence went off at once with Charles, and Anstruther turned in desolation of spirit to find a companion among the less distinguished young ladies. The party was large, talkative, and amusing. Charles was dazzled, excited, above all extremely entertained. The conversation, though evidently unstudied,

seemed to him brisk and witty. Florence made herself the centre of a hot fire of repartee, and received every onslaught with the cheerful daring of experienced success: as Erle and her father were within reach, she was in no danger of unwelcome tranquillity.

‘Well, Erle,’ asked the Major presently from his end of the table, ‘and how did you like your new purchase? he is handsome enough, at any rate.’

‘Do you mean Runnymede?’ asked Erle. ‘He is delightful, I assure you, when one has once become friends with him, and will soon be careful enough to carry a bishop.’

‘He is very unfortunate, then,’ said Anstruther, ‘for he is always in trouble. I should like to know how many mistakes he made to-day? Pray, what is his history?’

‘I bought him of Lord Almersfield,’ said Erle, ‘for five-and-twenty pounds. He gave him six falls in a single morning; and Lady Almersfield never left off crying till he was safe in my possession.’

‘Safe is hardly the word for him wherever he is,’ said Anstruther. ‘However, you get amusement out of him, and a new sensation, I suppose?’



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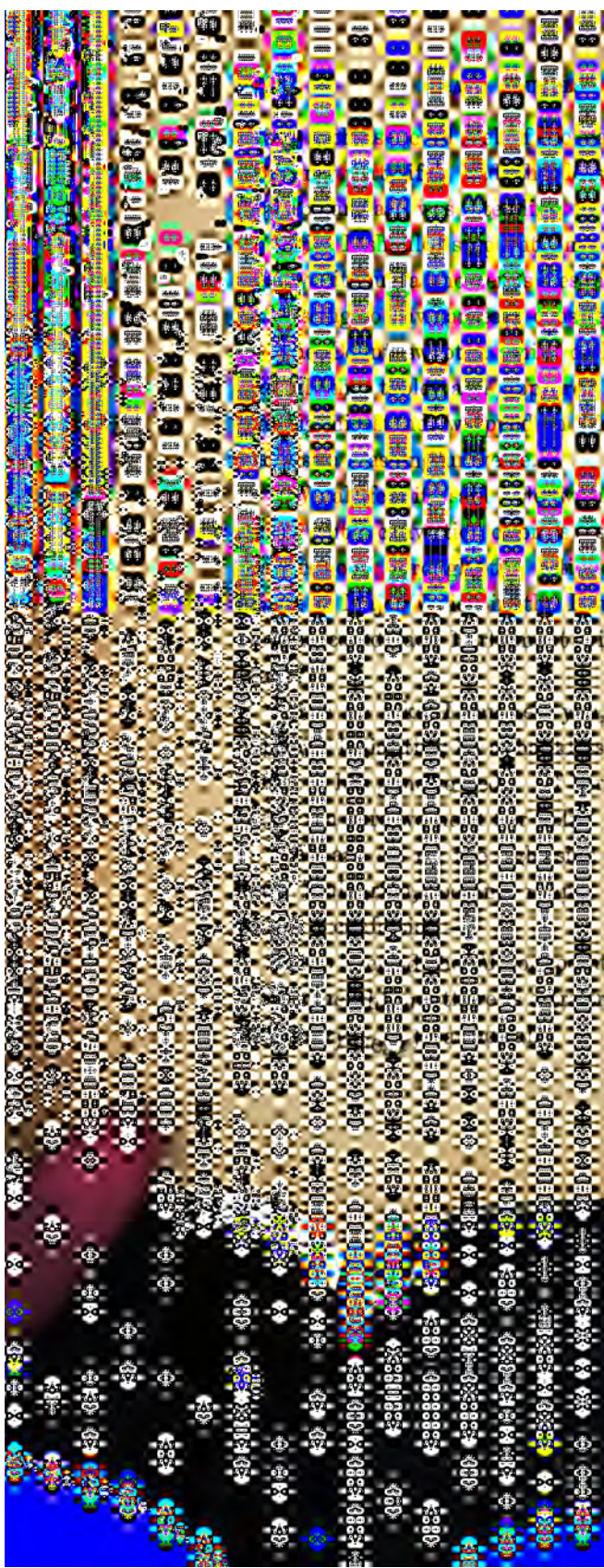
Erle said. 'Anstruther and I, when in our extravagant young days, found it out to our cost.'

'Well,' said the Major, 'my Jew was a religious Jew, but had a weakness for roast pig, and loved to retire into the country to regale himself occasionally on the forbidden delicacy. Once, in the middle of one of his illicit repasts, there came on a thunder-storm. Every flash of lightning seemed a special judgment on his crime. The thunder went on; the flashes were awful; the little pig succulent; the Jew fumed, trembled, and ate. At last a louder clap than ever made him too frightened to continue. "What a fush!" he exclaimed, as he resigned his knife and fork in indignation, "what a fush about a little piesh of pork!"'

'Poor Jew!' cried Florence; 'it was really hard; but a thunder-storm always frightens one out of one's wits, even though one is doing nothing wrong. That horrid old Lady Whigton, you know, like a mean wretch as she was, used to make her maid dress up in her clothes, in hopes she might get struck instead of herself.'

'Ha!' said the Count, 'I honour her ladyship for that—a good piece of racy, downright selfish-





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'A traitress!' cried Malagrida, in assumed alarm, 'a radical! a monster!'

'Yes,' said Florence, 'I confess I like a winning cause. I am quite tired of minorities. Just look at your last *fiasco*.'

'They are badly generalised,' said Malagrida; 'it is all Coningsby's fault, you know.'

'No, no!' cried Florence; 'that is always the complaint of bad soldiers. Coningsby is their greatest card, after all, only they play him so dreadfully.'

'Or rather,' suggested Erle, 'how dreadfully he uses them. A whole day of ruses, a night attack, a hopeless battle, and a long march home through the mud.'

'With the loss of bag, baggage, and artillery,' added the Major, who was still smarting with the recollection of a compulsory Methodist Rate-in-aid Bill. 'All our great principles are gone to the dogs.'

'You cannot go skirmishing,' said the Count, 'except in light attire. Believe me, you look extremely well without your principles, and will no doubt get accustomed to it by degrees.'

'Oh, yes!' said Erle; 'they will get to like it like Coningsby himself: in one's old age one

AURALS.

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## CHAPTER VI.

## HELEN.

— The petitionary grace  
Of sweet seventeen.

THE chestnut, who had had a good rest, and been hospitably cared for in the Clyffe stables, seemed quite to have recovered from his morning's trial, and started off in the highest spirits. As he cantered gaily homewards Charles set himself to think over his morning's adventure and his new acquaintance. His reflections were not altogether agreeable. The society which he had left was a keener atmosphere than that to which he was going, and he had liked to breathe it. He was roused into a bolder and more ambitious than his ordinary mood, and he felt overstrung for his Underwood home, its quiet enjoyment, its unambitious mirth, its simple and unconscious kindness. He had left behind him a set of people brilliant, ready, well accustomed to the latest phases of life, deeply



versed in its ways, *blasés* with its pleasures, familiar with its crimes. He had heard books, men, politics touched upon with an experienced daring, an off-hand half contempt, and, at the same time, an amusing cleverness that completely dazzled him. 'Was everyone in the great world,' he thought to himself, 'as sharp as they? and if so, how tame a place the Manor must be thought!' He fretted at the idea of the Squire's kindly garrulousness, the little country chit-chat he loved, and the village matters which he thought quite worth hearing about and discussing. How the young chestnut had jumped; how the hounds were looking; whether James, the new whip, was as quick as William, his predecessor; where the fox had broken, and where it had gone, and why it did not go somewhere else; and whether the huntsman thought it was the same fox that had given them such a good run from the same wood a month before—all these questions Charles knew that his grandfather would, in due course of time, propound, and would consider them the natural and appropriate topics of the evening. They were not, he bitterly felt, worth so much attention: there were bigger matters in the world, and keener interests, and of these he seemed just to

have had a taste enough to disincline him for his old pursuits. Margaret, too, it must be confessed, paled by the side of Florence's more striking beauty. Her simplicity of character contrasted with the other's confident shrewdness: her modesty was pretty indeed; but Florence's daring air, and high-spirited gestures, were far more impressive: her effortless flow of gentleness and good-humour, after Florence's impetuous fascinations, seemed like the pools of some half-stagnant stream loitering by the side of a noisy, brisk mountain torrent. 'We don't set up for wits at Underwood,' the Squire had often said with cheerful contentment. Charles in his heart acknowledged and resented the confession, and for the first time in his life felt half ashamed of his home. Florence was glittering before his mind's eye, and made everything else look meagre and colourless. Presently, as he rode along a bridle path, he came upon a flight of hurdles, and when the chestnut half offered to refuse, Charles, delighted to vent his ill-humour, clapped his spurs to his sides, and rode him at it so fiercely that the young horse was soon as hot as ever, and revenged himself for so unprovoked an assault by being as disagreeable as possible all the way home. There was a chorus of

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temper is its caprice: it flares out at this or that without rhyme or reason, and sometimes the most harmless causes provoke the worst explosions. Charles was far from having expended his anger on his horse, and proceeded to let it off at his cousin. He had been by no means fond of Nelly. When he last saw her she was in that unpleasing interval, between childhood and youth, that seems to lack most of the charms of both. He fancied her flighty, vain, and trivial: he remembered that she was apt to be passionate, and to take offence: he pictured her to himself as awkward and embarrassed, with very untidy clothes, and a constant supply of needless blushes. Margaret's enthusiastic affection seemed extremely provoking. To have the arrival of a schoolgirl made the occasion of a scene, and himself obliged to play a part in it, was just the sort of petty idea against which, just now, his whole nature was in rebellion.

'You know,' said Margaret, 'you must be delighted to see her.'

'Delighted!' said Charles, with a dash of contempt in his tone: 'of course—youth, beauty, innocence, the interest of an expanding mind, an accurate knowledge of geography, the multiplica-

LS.

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other, and Nelly had never reflected on the method which would best, at present, reconcile the claims of propriety and affection. She took her cousin's hand, grew very red, hung back an instant, and finished by presenting him with a crimson cheek, on which Charles, as in duty bound, impressed a reverent token of devotion. Altogether she lost her presence of mind; but she lost it in the most becoming manner, and looked so bewitchingly modest, that Charles would have been a perfect monster not to repent instantaneously of his surliness. Her appearance was a wonderful improvement upon his recollections; her schoolgirl awkwardness had given place to a striking beauty of form and movement; her very embarrassment wore a graceful air; her high colour had softened down to a warm, delicate tint; and her dress, which looked beautifully new and fresh, was in good taste, and showed her off to advantage.

'Welcome to Underwood!' he cried; and Margaret looked on, delighted at the good impression she was evidently making. Then the Squire came out; the same kisses, without the same embarrassment, were interchanged, Mr. Evelyn declared her grown, praised his granddaughter's blooming cheeks, and Margaret presently carried her off for



LS.

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
Charles? a little fast, are they not? Mrs. Vivien is a great deal too much of a fine lady for me.'

'They are very amusing,' said Charles, 'and know all about everything. That Italian is a curious fellow, grandfather; there's some mystery about him; they say he is a Carbonaro, or a government spy, and afraid to go home, because he has killed some one. He told us all sorts of queer doings about the Romish priests, policemen, and society. What do you think?—the Duke of Baveno was coming home one night——'

'Hush!' said the Squire, who had a morbid horror of anything like a scandal. 'I think I hear your cousins on the stairs.'

Charlie checked himself in time to change the conversation before the door opened; but he reflected that Miss Vivien had heard the story in the afternoon without the least displeasure.

Meanwhile Nelly was established upstairs, enjoying the first pleasant taste of home life, and busy with the cares of a needlessly sedulous toilette. Box after box was opened, ransacked, and deserted in the search for some essential ornament. It was late, indeed, and there were but three people to see, but not too late to hesitate as to the fitting shade of colour, the prettiest



riband, the appropriate dress; nor were three pairs of eyes, two of them belonging to men, too few to raise a little flutter of excitement and apprehension. Besides, Charles's appearance gave a new, strange, powerful interest to the occasion. Men, so Nelly's instructresses and her French school life had taught her, were creatures of a far-off world, to be seen, talked of, perhaps even thought about, but scarcely to be spoken to or handled; they passed in the street, but they were hardly more than phantoms. The sudden proximity was novel, alarming—on the whole agreeable. Nelly had no dream of love, except as a vague, awful, mysterious possibility. She and her companions, indeed, cherished a sort of wild admiration for a picturesque Pole who came twice a-week to give them music lessons, and who was conventionally regarded as the type of human excellence; but the Pole had impressed himself but in the most hazy outline on her heart, and was already fast fading from her recollection. To have a real live, fresh young man calmly walk up to her and embrace her, to have him take her hand in his, to hear him talk, to be about to spend an evening in his society, was something more than she could as yet confront with quiet nerves.



Vanity made her shy, nervousness put her into a bustle. Margaret came at last to fetch her, and was for hurrying the preparations.

‘I must not look quite a fright, must I?’ she said, petitioning for another five minutes; ‘to-morrow, dear Meg, I must show you my new dresses: the last fortnight, you know, I have opened no book but “Le Follet,” and spent half my life at the dressmaker’s, and I have got two bonnets which—which—but you shall see to-morrow.’

‘They are pretty, I hope?’ asked her sister.

‘Pretty!’ exclaimed Nelly, in a fervent tone, which implied that no human expression could do the least justice to her feelings; ‘my dearest Meg, wait!’

And so the two went downstairs and found the Squire and Charles waiting for them. Nelly need have been under no alarm as to the impression created by her arrival. Charles had already been loud in her praises. No ray of light darting upon a sombre scene, ever effected a quicker change than did the new-comer amid her more staid relations. She was no sooner at her ease than she began to be playful and to infect the rest with playfulness. She darted about the room

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tally forecasting the precise dress in which so miscellaneous an assortment of visitors would be most properly received. 'What is he like, Margaret?'

'Black, fierce, beautiful, of course,' said Margaret, 'with a belt full of pistols and a cave full of diamonds and captured ladies. But let us go upstairs before we frighten ourselves with talking of him.'

Altogether the first evening was a success. Nelly was not slow in appreciating her reception, and departed to her room full of glee.

Margaret, relieved of all anxiety on her behalf, carried her off at last in triumph, and could not resist coming down again to hear in actual words the verdict which Charles's manner had already impliedly pronounced.

'Well?' she said, and her cousin knew well enough how to interpret the inquiry.

'Well, Margaret,' he said, 'she is bewitchingly pretty, beautifully dressed, and ten times more a baby than ever.'

'She is an angel, sir,' said Margaret. 'Find a fault in her if you dare!'

She paused a moment at the door, as if to see if her challenge were accepted—generosity, can-



dour, nobleness written in fair characters in her face, her mock-defiant attitude full of infectious daring, her eye radiant with spirit, yet full of pathos. 'Follow her,' cried the warning voice once again, and Charles took half a step in obedience to the summons. 'Stop!' whispered a craven scruple; 'be sure that she loves you — beware of too much haste; the moment is unpropitious, the hour is late; you have had more than half a quarrel to-night, it will be better to-morrow.'

While he was yet hesitating, the sound of voices outside told him that the opportunity was past.

'To-morrow, you know,' the Squire was saying to Margaret, 'we shall be busy with the Viviens.'

Margaret gave a half-comic sigh of weariness: 'Nelly's first afternoon!' she cried; 'how I wish Clyffe was ten miles farther off!'

'Not so I,' Charles thought to himself; and that night he was once more, in dreamland, galloping in the hunting-field; Florence Vivien was at his side, and Nelly, like some pretty sprite of mischief, hovered nimbly about him; Margaret stood beckoning him towards her, and 'Follow! follow!' seemed to ring through the air, as if a hundred voices urged him to his fate.

## CHAPTER VII.

## THE FIRST PARALLEL OPENED.

*Catherine.*—Of all thy suitors, here I charge thee, tell  
Whom thou lovest best: see thou dissemble not.

*Bianca.*—Believe me, sister, of all the men alive  
I never yet beheld that special face  
Which I could fancy more than any other.

THE Manor was scarcely a show place, and yet there was quite enough that was pretty and curious about it to make it a worthy object of an afternoon's expedition. The Clyffe party took up the scheme with zeal; Florence organised a cavalcade of riders, but was herself obliged to go, much against her will, with the lazy people who preferred a comfortable carriage for a ten miles' journey. Erle, who was indolence itself, acquiesced cheerfully enough in Mrs. Vivien's proposal that he should accompany them. Anstruther in vain petitioned for a seat, but was sent off to show the riders the way and to make himself agreeable: the fourth place was assigned to Malagrida.

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‘Let me get out of the carriage,’ said Mrs. Vivien, with a groan.

‘The two last classes,’ continued the Count, unruffled, ‘are what old age abounds in; what is expected of you is—to die; and as to vindictiveness, just look at people’s wills!’

‘Ah!’ said Erle, ‘that explains what one sees in the “Times”—“*Friends* will please accept this intimation.”’

‘Well!’ said Florence, ‘my complaint against old age is, that it is like the rest of life—so aimless: from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, and then from hour to hour—you know the rest.’

‘Oh, yes!’ cried Erle, ‘and thereby hangs a tale—much too grave a one to talk about.’

‘You seem resolved,’ Mrs. Vivien said, complainingly, ‘to have a most disagreeable conversation; I heartily wish you were all riding.’

‘Well,’ said Florence, who enjoyed the vein upon which they had lighted, ‘one age is much the same as another, after all. I declare I see nothing in the world to live for. Why should one exist?’

‘The beautiful and the good,’ said Malagrida, with an air of sincerity, ‘are ends in themselves. Miss Vivien’s *raison d’être* is—Miss Vivien.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said Florence, with a laugh, ‘for being so polite. I congratulate you upon your discrimination. Who knows but some day I may retreat from a frivolous world, turn *dévoté*, become a Mother Superior, and perhaps be known to future ages as St. Florence of—of—’

‘Of Mayfair,’ cried Erle, scoffingly, ‘by all means; only there your worship will have begun before canonisation; let us say, rather, of Clyffe, where you will have had the advantage of my society in becoming ethereal: by the way, is ethereal the word?’

‘No,’ Florence answered, laughing, ‘I am not proposing to become a sprite; but you are a heathen, you know, and naturally choose a Pagan idea.’

‘Do I?’ answered the other; ‘well, in revenge for that I will challenge half of Malagrida’s encomium: seriously, I acquit you of all extraordinary goodness.’

‘And why, pray?’ asked Florence, with a pleased curiosity; ‘why am I not to be good?’

‘First,’ said Erle, ‘you know you trifled with my feelings when I was a little boy—young, foolish, and enthusiastic.’

‘Dreadful offence,’ laughed Florence; ‘and what next?’

‘Next,’ said Erle, ‘you despair of life, as you say, and are entirely objectless: that, you know, is in itself an offence of the very first order.’

‘Heaven forbid!’ cried Florence. ‘Count Malagrida, what is your object in life, and how often in the twenty-four hours are you enthusiastic?’

‘My object,’ said the Count, ‘is to win your approval; and I am enthusiastic as often as I think that I have a chance of succeeding.’

‘How much more agreeable Italians are than these Englishmen!’ said Florence. ‘Count Malagrida, I invite you to come for a drive in my pony-carriage to-morrow.’

‘Delightful!’ cried the Count, ‘and we will explore the philosophy of friendship without the interposition of a mere novice like Erle.’

‘Let us begin at once,’ said Florence: ‘what shall we make the first principle?’

‘Hope nothing, trust no one, and be sure that the oldest acquaintance will treat one the worst.’

‘Obviously,’ said Erle, who had no notion of being left behind, ‘because they know one the best, and see how much there is to dislike.’



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ment, which contrasted excellently with the comical light in which she placed her misfortune.

The Squire helped her carefully from room to room, and gave her a little lecture on careless horsemanship. 'None of you young ladies,' he said, 'ever take the slightest care of your necks.'

'Indeed I beg your pardon, Mr. Evelyn,' cried Florence; 'I am a most discreet rider, and I dislike tumbling off far too much to do it oftener than I am obliged. It is very disagreeable, you know; one gets dirtied and shaken, and looks very undignified, and tears one's habit, and loses the rest of the day's amusement. If I were always as fortunate as yesterday in my companion the case might be different.'

'Charles,' said Erle, 'Miss Vivien is paying you an elaborate compliment; I hope you're attending.'

Charles, though in another group of talkers, was attending with all his heart, and heard nothing but the pleasant sounds of Florence's talk, gay, rapid, high-spirited. Never had she been in a more brilliant mood than to-day, never more prepared to please, never more mistress of herself. The reception accorded her by the two sisters exactly justified her expectations. Margaret,



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‘Do you think Margaret pretty?’ asked her companion, blushing scarlet in her embarrassment.

‘Yes,’ Florence said, laughing—‘I admire her and somebody else very much indeed. Come here and let me introduce you to Count Magrida.’

‘Oh no, please!’ Nelly said, with a half-imploping air; and while she yet stood in a pretty attitude of indecision, with the blush still warm on her cheek, and her Paris dress looking as fresh and beautiful as in a picture-book, the Count himself came up and glided gracefully into the conversation.

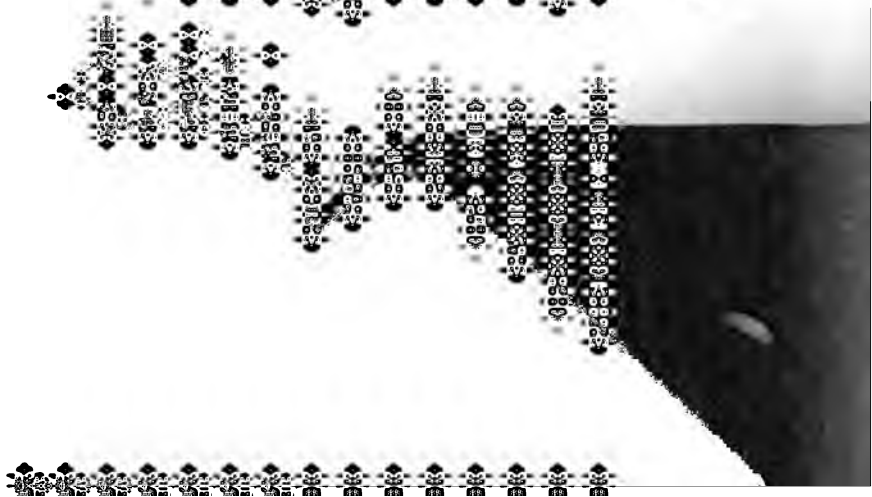
‘A little gem,’ he thought to himself, as he scanned the figure before him from head to foot.

‘The brigand,’ thought Nelly, remembering her sister’s description; ‘and oh how I wish Margaret was here!’

Presently Margaret proposed to go to the garden, and Florence acceded at once, and told Erle to come with them; in passing out the three found themselves alone in the conservatory.

‘Here,’ cried Erle, as he came upon the unused garden-chair, ‘is a fortunate discovery; I will

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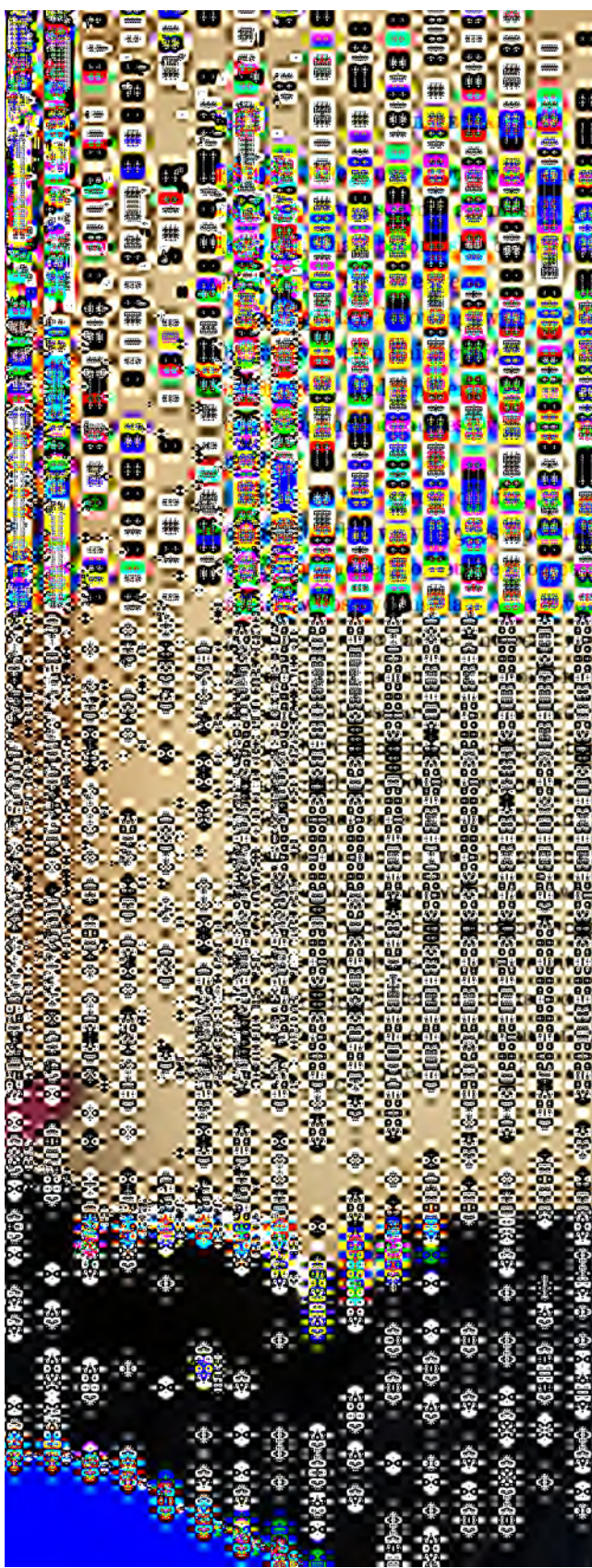
father was close behind, and she could gauge by her own feelings the sort of shock which the sight of an unaccustomed familiarity would give him. On this day, moreover, she guarded his sensitiveness with especial care; for, since he had become a widower, hospitalities at the Manor House had been rare, and were generally the signal for a mood of more than usual melancholy. She resolved to speak; but trivial as the matter was, it cost her an unexpected effort; the very fact that it did so convinced her of its necessity.

‘We had better not take the chair,’ she said, ‘if you can manage without it. It belonged to some one who is dead, and my grandfather would scarcely like it used in fun.’

Florence, one foot already upon it, turned round in surprise, and with difficulty repressed the angry sneer that trembled on her lips. Could anything be more utterly insignificant? yet what trifle is too small to fan the flame of dislike? There seemed something ignominious in dismounting at another person’s injunction, and though it only *seemed*, Florence felt a pang shoot through her heart, and did not care to explain it away. Was it rude that Margaret should speak as she had, or fanciful, or unfortu-

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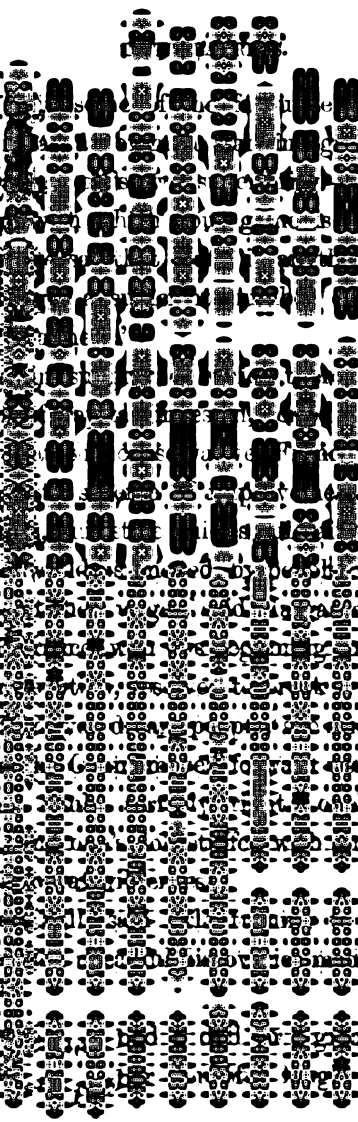
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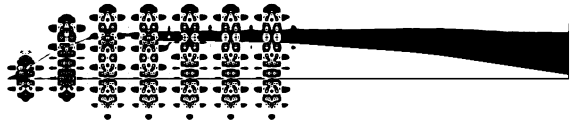
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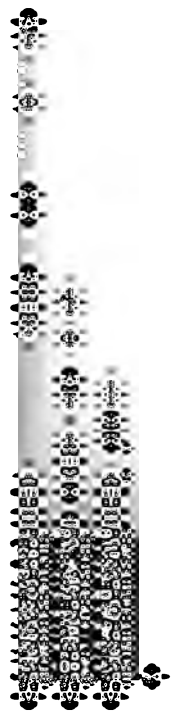
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laugh. 'It is quite natural for you to dislike Mr. Erle.'

'I did not say that,' said Nelly, blushing to find her thoughts read, almost before she herself had known them.

'You said it with your eyes,' said the other; 'a very easy language to read, you know, if one only learns it.'

'Is it?' said Nelly; 'and what else have you read to-day?'

'Shall I tell you?' said Florence. 'Well, since we are to be confidential and great friends, I will. It concerns yourself. Now begin to blush as much as you please. Yours are not the only eyes I can read.'

'Are they not?' asked Nelly, frightened out of her wits at what might be coming.

'A very handsome pair of soft blue eyes, that grow wonderfully eloquent every time they fall in a certain direction.'

'And what do they say?' said the other.

'Little hypocrite!' cried Florence; 'you cannot guess in the least, I suppose?'

'I cannot,' said Nelly, 'and I declare I do not know whose eyes you mean.'

'*Le beau cousin*,' answered Florence. 'And,

you dear little piece of innocence, what do you think of him? You love him, don't you ?'

'Yes,' said Nelly, with simplicity—'of course, I always have—at least—'

'At least what ?'

'Since we were very little, and he used to break my playthings, and be a horrible tease. We three are like brothers and sisters, you know.'

'Are you ?' said Florence ; 'but I mean something else than that. What a pretty cheek you have, dear—and how I like to make it blush !'

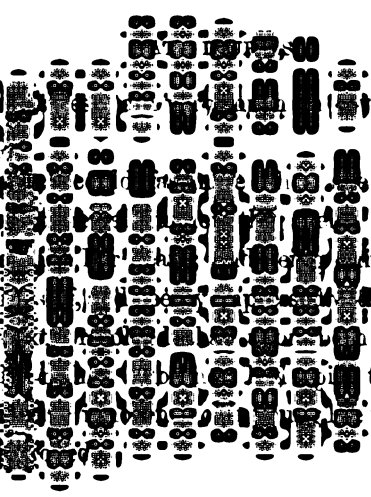
'I am telling you the truth,' said Nelly. 'I have never thought of him but in one way. He is much greater friends with Margaret than with me.'

Florence tapped her hand with a gentle mockery, and burst out into the most incredulous of laughs.

'You are both of you extremely in love with one another,' she said ; 'and if it is news to you, it would not, I am sure, be so to your cousin.'

'You think not ?' said Nelly, wonderingly. 'I am sure I knew nothing about it.'

'You must not think me very impertinent,' said Florence. 'You know I am a privileged old



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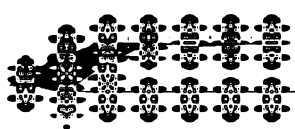
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looks she mistrusted her superiority ; for though she had often enough tested the efficacy of her own, there was something in Margaret's bearing that was strangely impressive. Her beauty was of an order, quiet, pure, and, so far from dazzling, that the eye seemed only gradually educated to appreciate its worth. The admiration which it excited, if less readily expressed, would probably, Florence felt, be something more profound and earnest than the easily-turned compliments of which she reaped so plentiful a crop. Moreover, the calm, serious, studied kindness of manner with which Margaret treated her, seemed to imply a lurking sentiment of pity, or scorn, or disapproval—all three intolerably distasteful to Florence's vanity. She tried, in her turn, to feel contemptuous, but tried in vain : Margaret inspired her with an uneasiness which was not to be ignored. Failing indifference, Florence resolved upon war, and each new circumstance added vehemence to her resolution. Radical as her father painted her, there was a touch of the mischief-maker in her composition which inclined her to disarrange any constituted authority. Her love of disturbance in *the abstract* was now quickened by zeal against an *individual*. Margaret, she could see, was the pre-

siding spirit at the Manor ; it was a little empire, yet enough to grudge to an enemy. She ruled the Squire, her sister, her cousin, without an effort, unconsciously on her part and theirs, but with all the more completeness. She should do so, Florence resolved, no longer. Nelly, she chose to believe, was oppressed, and with Nelly she resolved forthwith to side. Charles seemed like a puppet in her hands, the prize of the encounter, to be assigned to this side or that, as the fortunes of the day should turn. It would be a pleasant triumph to win him for the weaker antagonist ; it would be pleasant to humble that calm, indifferent, majestic nature ; it would be pleasant to contrive, and see one's contrivances effectual ; above everything, pleasant to have a little admiring, grateful dependent, moving obedient at beck and call, and accepting joyously the results of one's superior prowess. So ran Florence's dream, half-meddlesome, half-resentful, short-sighted, selfish, superficial, and fatally perilous to the happiness of those whose fortunes fell within its scope.

That evening they discussed their new acquaintance at Clyffe. Erle's high spirits of the afternoon had been succeeded by a quiet mood ; he was sitting silent on a distant sofa, when




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pliment,' said Erle. 'Besides, my performances in that line are things of the romantic land of long ago. I assure you I take a merely artistic view of her perfections.'

'Well,' Florence said, 'jealous as of course I am, and blind in consequence, I agree in your verdict. Miss St. Aubyn is grave, beautiful, and a good subject for a Madonna. I can scarcely help worshipping her myself.'

Erle was delighted to have found a weapon with which he could annoy Florence, as he perceived he did. He had admired Margaret, and he now began to value his admiration as a useful weapon of attack.

'Yes,' he said; 'you might easily say your prayers before a worse shrine. I fancy her some forgotten Madonna—Raphael's gentlest, most un-earthly masterpiece.'

Florence looked by no means impressed. 'Let us ask Captain Anstruther,' she said, as the young soldier came up. 'Captain Anstruther, here is Mr. Erle in a very despondent and sentimental mood, and becoming quite dangerously poetical. Come, please, and cheer him up, and give us your opinion of the Underwood beauties.'

‘L’Allegra and Penserosa?’ cried Anstruther.  
‘I am for l’Allegra.’

‘You forget,’ said Erle, ‘that Anstruther is only a little boy, and, I dare say, has play-drum at home to match the young lady’s wax-doll; indeed, being in the Guards is only playing at soldiers, after all, is it not, Anstruther?’

‘Well,’ said Anstruther, ‘I am l’Allegra’s knight, and pin her badge to my sleeve. Penserosa is too lofty.’

‘Yes,’ cried Florence—

‘She is all fault who hath no fault at all;  
For who loves me must have a touch of earth.’

‘So say not I,’ cried Erle, delighted to find how much interest Florence took in his latest mood.

‘A good thing cannot possibly be too good.’

‘Did you ever hear anything like it?’ said Florence, appealing to her other companion; ‘our poor friend is evidently struck at last.’

‘It is a melancholy sight,’ said Anstruther, ‘and a just retribution!’

‘Neither of you,’ said Erle, ‘have the least chance of laughing me out of my convictions. You gave me some Tennyson just now, now listen to Mrs. Browning:—

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' — her face is lily-clear,  
Lily-shaped, and dropped in duty,  
To the law of its own beauty.  
  
Oval cheeks, encoloured faintly,  
Which a trail of golden hair  
Keeps from fading off to air :  
  
And a forehead fair and saintly,  
Which two blue eyes undershine,  
Like meek prayers before a shrine.'

'Meek prayers before a shrine !' repeated Florence, in a tone of amused and wondering incredulity. 'Well, Mr. Erle, marvels will never cease, I suppose.'

'A beautiful description,' continued Erle, undisturbed, 'and taken, I feel convinced, from the young lady in question. All I know is, that if I were a lucky young fellow, like Anstruther there, with youth, beauty, virtue, and a competence, I should lay them all at her feet, without a moment's hesitation.'

'All four ?' said Florence, with a touch of contempt; 'that would indeed be generous. Well, you will not have to wait long to do homage, for they are to stay here next week.'

'Then,' said Erle, 'I shall certainly ask Mrs. Vivien to let me lengthen my visit.'

'And so shall I,' cried Anstruther. 'L'Allegra quite haunts me !'

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‘I hope you will be charitable enough to ask Charlie, too,’ said Erle. ‘If appearances may be trusted, he is pretty much of the same opinion as myself.’

‘We have asked the whole party,’ said Florence, ‘adored and adorers alike. Meanwhile, pray come and console yourself with some Beethoven.’

Erle’s admiration for Margaret put the finishing touch to the animosity with which Florence regarded her. His enthusiasm was evidently affected, and yet it had sincerity enough about it to be intensely annoying. For years she had been accustomed to regard him in the light of a rejected suitor—her own, if she chose to have him. Another attachment startled her, as almost a desertion. Their intimacy, though by no means affectionate, was thorough, real, and of long enough standing to clash with the idea of a new alliance. If Erle decried the sex, at any rate he paid her the compliment of decrying it *to her*, and she could ill brook that his confidences should be whispered in another’s ear. That Margaret should usurp her prescriptive right—that hers should be the hand to administer a blow so damaging to prestige, so humiliating to vanity, was a contingency *which*, however remote its probability, it

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was torture even to think of. Florence felt the hot blood flash into her cheeks at the mere idea of so cruel a defeat, and eager fancy crowded her mind at once with a hundred remorseless schemes of self-defence and retribution. What would not be lawful in such a warfare? what vengeance could possibly atone for so deadly an affront?

A few days later the Underwood party arrived, and Florence found herself forthwith committed to the campaign, whose outline she had already dimly forecast. Erle and Anstruther both stayed on, as they had threatened, and neither seemed in the least danger of repenting their decision. Nelly arrived in a flutter of excitement, delighted with an opportunity of displaying her Paris treasures, and presented a combination of coquetry and bashfulness which even Malagrida acknowledged was delightful. To Erle she seemed a baby, and a baby not of the most interesting description. He saw that she was the creature of foibles, and it amused him to play with them. He vied with the Count in paying her elaborate compliments; he asked her opinion with a flattering gravity; and talked to her about her wax-doll with an interest that fairly passed her comprehension. Florence saw that she was

frightened, and enjoyed the process of mystifying her.

‘Tell me about Mr. Erle,’ she said, one day.

‘Oh,’ said Florence, ‘you must be courageous, and he will do you no harm. He is very alarming, of course, but I keep him in great order.’

‘What is he?’ asked Nelly.

‘What?’ cried Florence; ‘well, I will tell you;’ and she pretended to look round the room, came close up to her companion, and whispered into her ear the close of Auber’s pretty song—“*Diavolo, Diavolo, Diavolo!*”

‘What do you mean?’ said Nelly, thoroughly puzzled.

‘I am quite in earnest,’ said the other. ‘Seriously, he is a fop, a cynic, a hardened flirt, and, in short, Mephistopheles.’

‘Mephistopheles?’ said Nelly, in a tone of awe.

‘Yes,’ said her companion, ‘and gobbles up a nice little innocent like you, whenever he can catch one. So, beware!’

‘Well,’ said Nelly, tossing her head with the most becomingly childish pout; ‘he is a great deal too patronising; he talks to me as if I still wore pinafores, and he were a hundred and fifty.’

‘Of course,’ cried Florence, ‘and so he is, and

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a great deal more too. You forget who I told you he was; but I will take care of you.'

Nelly speedily accepted the proffered intimacy; Florence constantly befriended her; showed a kind watchfulness for her enjoyment; petted her into being outspoken, and, one by one, by a gentle extortion, dragged the little innocent secrets of her heart—her baby loves, her vague ambition, her tiny coquetries, her shallow, half-grown sentiment from their hiding-place.

'Do you know,' said Florence, caressingly, 'you have quite bewitched me? What is your spell, I wonder?'

'You like me?' said Nelly, delighted, and yet half-alarmed at her audacity; 'well, so do I you. Do you think me very bold?'

'I think you a dear little frightened goose, and I shall have a new baby-house to keep you in. I want pets, you know; you see I can get no one to marry me, and I never had a sister.'

'Ah,' said Nelly, 'that must be terrible. Margaret is my other self.'

'And you have no corner in your heart for me, then?' asked Florence, 'or for that naughty cousin of yours?'

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‘I thought,’ said Nelly, ‘you had forgotten all about that. I am sure I had.’

She knew, as she spoke, that she was telling a monstrous fib, and her glowing cheeks saved Florence the trouble of refutation.

There were some points, however, on which Nelly did not choose to be explicit with anyone but her sister.

‘I like them all, dear Meg,’ she said, in a private conference before her bedroom fire, all but—’

‘But who?’ inquired her sister.

‘Mr. Erle.’ And here she gave a shudder, more expressive than words.

‘Dear me!’ said Margaret, ‘I had not made up my mind; I think he is by no means the worst of the party.’

‘Don’t you?’ said Nelly. ‘I cannot bear him. What do you think, Meg—is he laughing at me? Does he mean to mock me? how could he know about my doll? I see him laugh secretly when he speaks to me, and I blush the moment he looks at me. How I wish he was gone!’

‘I would not trouble my head about him,’ said Margaret. ‘He is only a fine gentleman, brought ~~here~~ to make the parties amusing; but he is not

near so patronising as that tiresome Sir Agricola, nor as insipid as the young officer, Captain —, who was it?’

‘Anstruther,’ said Nelly. ‘Oh, but, do you know, he is charming, I assure you.’

‘I like the other best,’ said Margaret. ‘How good his stories were! But Charlie is far the nicest of them all, is he not?’

Both sisters kept clear of Florence, for about her they knew instinctively that they should disagree. Already a subtle something had crept between their loves.

Charles, on his arrival, had been surprised to find Erle still among the Clyffe guests.

‘I thought,’ he said, ‘he was to be at Lord Almerfield’s for the *battue* to-day?’

‘So he was,’ said Florence; ‘but he changed his mind.’

‘He found himself too well amused?’ suggested the other.

‘No,’ said Florence; ‘it was out of no compliment to us, as he took care to inform us. It was not till he heard you were coming that he resolved to stay.’

‘I thought he was so fond of shooting?’

‘Ah,’ said Florence, ‘but pheasants are not the

only things that people like to kill. And now I shall tell you no more.'

Charles was occasionally obtuse, and his thoughts always centred on himself.

'What in the world,' he wondered, 'can Erle want with me?'

Erle made it very speedily evident that he wanted nothing, and before many days Charles began to perceive his mistake.

'What sort of sportsman do you think he is?' Florence asked him, one evening, when Erle had persuaded Margaret to sing him some favourite air, and was tempting her, by a sudden display of musical enthusiasm, to linger at the piano—  
'What sort of sportsman do you think he is, Mr. Evelyn? And what much better shooting there is in our drawing-room than in Lord Almerfield's coverts, is there not?'

Charles, by this time, understood perfectly, and was by no means delighted with the discovery. Though courage and opportunity to speak had failed him, his cousin must, he thought, have gathered some intimation of his secret attachment. If so, what a woman's caprice was this for another's homage; if not, how strange a blindness to his own; in either case, how good a right for

him to feel aggrieved. Florence watched and enjoyed his distress and abetted his secret indignation. It suited her mood that Margaret should be seen engaged in an ordinary flirtation. She disliked her so thoroughly that it cost her no effort, and but little hypocrisy, to represent all that she did in a disagreeable light.

Her feeling, as she indulged it, and nursed it, and toiled for it, grew strangely vehement. The enemy whom she was attacking seemed to be more than her match. Other young ladies were afraid of her, eclipsed by her cleverness, and were ready to conciliate by flattery or submission. Margaret, on the contrary, was perfectly unawed, and held her own, with an unconscious dignity that was especially provoking. Florence laboured and contrived and dazzled, and at last scarcely won what the other obtained without an effort. Erle, though half in play, admired her, Florence could not help seeing, with an enthusiasm that she did not remember him to have exhibited towards herself. When she sat down to sing, her ear told her that there was a touch of genius in the strain, and a fascination about it, that her own more elaborate performance was quite without. Once when she had been looking at Margaret for a few moments, and turned



round suddenly to the mirror, she was quite startled to see how haggard and anxious she looked by the other's simple and effortless beauty. She was handsome; yes, indeed, how many people had told her so; but she was too good a judge not to know that the other's very unconsciousness was a charm far more irresistible than the cleverest finesse, the most brilliant talk, or highest result of art. Her soul grew black within her: the last scruple died away, and she resolved on victory at any price.

To such a mood opportunities are seldom wanting. Charles was impressed with her superior sagacity, and listened, at first with patience and then greedily, to the poisonous hints that she whispered at his ear. She spoke with an ostentatious deference that Charles felt was only in mockery of his own opinion, and by degrees he grew ashamed of his simplicity.

‘What!’ she would say, ‘Margaret like balls?’

‘Why not?’ asked Charles.

‘Well,’ said Florence, ‘I fancied you were all too angelic at Underwood for anything so commonplace.’

By degrees he caught from her something of a sneering mood. She pursed up her lips and looked

demure when Margaret spoke, and let Charles thoroughly understand that she disbelieved her sanctity. Sometimes the attack was openly conducted.

‘I am horribly malicious, you know, and like to lower every one I can; but tell me, is your cousin the paragon of innocence she looks?’

For the first time in his life it occurred to Charles to doubt it. ‘How penetrating women are!’ he thought; ‘and how blindly we worship at the altars where we are first taught to kneel!’

A few more hints, a few more days convinced him that Margaret was, at any rate, unsaintly enough to be laying siege to Erle. Florence, while she let him know that she too observed it, explained it pleasantly away. ‘Mr. Erle, you know, is irresistible. I have been telling your cousin he is Mephistopheles; and, by the way, Mr. Evelyn, did you ever read “Faust?”’

‘Yes,’ said Charles; ‘but why?’

‘The heroine ought to interest you; but, seriously, I do not think you need be alarmed—*on revient toujours*—you know.’

‘I declare I do not know in the least what you mean,’ Charles said, growing red as her meaning broke upon him.

‘*On revient toujours,*’—said Florence, unmoved—‘be that your consolation.’

Charles began to comprehend that Margaret was not above the conquests of her sex. She had been in possession of his heart, she was now laying siege to Erle’s, and, comforting reflection!—she might some day come back to him. Pride caught fire at the suggestion, and every affectionate act or word of Margaret’s, for the future, was poisoned to his taste.

‘They who wish to go wrong may be sure of Fortune’s assistance;’ and one unlucky chance after another strengthened Charles’s conviction, and inflamed his angry mood.

One fine afternoon there was to be an excursion to a neighbour on whom all were anxious to call. The carriage, which had to go a few miles round, was to start first: the rest of the party, Margaret and her grandfather and Florence, were to ride half an hour afterwards. Nelly had already taken her seat beside Mrs. Vivien, and Erle was just proposing to join them, when Margaret came running downstairs. ‘Mr. Erle,’ she said, ‘can you give my grandfather those extracts from Lord Ascot’s speech that you promised him for this evening’s post?’

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and as using a vulgar stratagem. To be jealous of her sister, to indulge her jealousy by a false pretence, to trade on her affection for her grandfather! the very thought was profanation; but it lingered in Charles's mind, and while its venom was distilling, his evil genius spread yet another snare for his unwary feet.

Both Margaret and Florence were artists, and Margaret's portfolio especially gave ample evidence of her summer diligence. Florence, for once in a placable mood, was exploring its treasures, and came at last upon a little sketch of the Underwood lawn, with a piece of a gable of the house, and a few yards of hop-wreathed verandah. 'I am going to carry this off, if I may,' she had said. 'What a nice corner you have chosen, and how sunny you have made it all look!'

'Do take it,' Margaret answered, glad of an opportunity of outwardly belying the dislike which she was conscious of harbouring against her companion. 'But it is not half finished: let me fill in the foreground for you.'

'No, no,' cried Florence; 'sit just where you are, and I will put you in myself; sitting there in *the shade of the lime-tree*, your figure will recall *the whole scene* to me more than anything.'



Florence was excellent at portraiture, and now the whim seized her to be elaborately exact, and to put forth all the skill at her command. The smallness of the scale made the task a hard one, and would have justified any imperfection; but she resolved that her part of the picture should not be the worst: a quick eye for outline, used often for the purposes of caricature, enabled her speedily to catch the striking points of the desired form. In a few strokes she gave the small, finely-shaped head, the delicate neck, the easy attitude, natural, dignified, and, as she joyously declared, unmis-takeable.

‘There!’ she said; ‘so much for the drapery. Now let me try the face: turn a little away, please, and show me the profile.’

Margaret, pleased to humour her, sat patiently on, as again and again Florence, more intent than ever on success, paused to consider the precise effect of some new tint, to fix the rightful incidence of a shade, or to retouch some line which failed to satisfy her eye. At last the task was done. Margaret confessed, and was delighted with, the resemblance; and Florence, already half wearying with a too-sustained effort, transferred

the sketch without another thought to the depth of her portfolio.

‘What do you think of that?’ she said to Erle a day or two afterwards, as he leant over the table where she was busy with her paint-box. ‘That is something you have not seen yet—Underwood in its summer attire. Is it not a pretty sketch?’

‘Very nice indeed,’ said Erle, ‘but not at all in your style. Whose pretty handiwork is it, I wonder?’

‘I wonder!’ said Florence, with an air of mystery: ‘the figure, however, is mine. You recognise it, of course?’

‘I really had not observed,’ answered the other. ‘Oh, yes, now I do. Well, that is very cleverly managed, indeed.’

‘And exactly like?’ said Florence.

‘No,’ said Erle, with a laugh: ‘there is a grace about Miss St. Aubyn which defies caricature.’

‘Caricature!’ cried Florence, in indignation.

‘I assure you I took the greatest pains with it.’

‘Well,’ said Erle, with a petitionary air, ‘I am going to pay you the sincerest of all compliments. Be good-natured, and give it to me.’

‘Give it *you*!’ said Florence. ‘How have you courage to ask it? Impossible!’

‘Then I won’t come to your theatricals,’ said Erle, with a laugh.

‘That is a cogent argument, indeed,’ replied his companion; ‘for I look to you entirely to arrange them: but you will not be so mean as to make terms.’

‘Will I not?’ said Erle: ‘and mean, indeed! Why should I come and be your stage-manager, and drill the Miss Dangerfields, and have interviews with all sorts of horrid people, and take a world of trouble, and all for nothing?’

‘I believe you will do it out of kindness to us,’ said Florence.

‘Interesting credulity!’ exclaimed the other: ‘you take a most flattering view of my good-nature; but no, nothing but the picture will buy me.’

‘How conceited you are!’ said Florence.

‘Yes,’ answered Erle: ‘that is one of the reasons of my good acting. I shall be a great loss.’

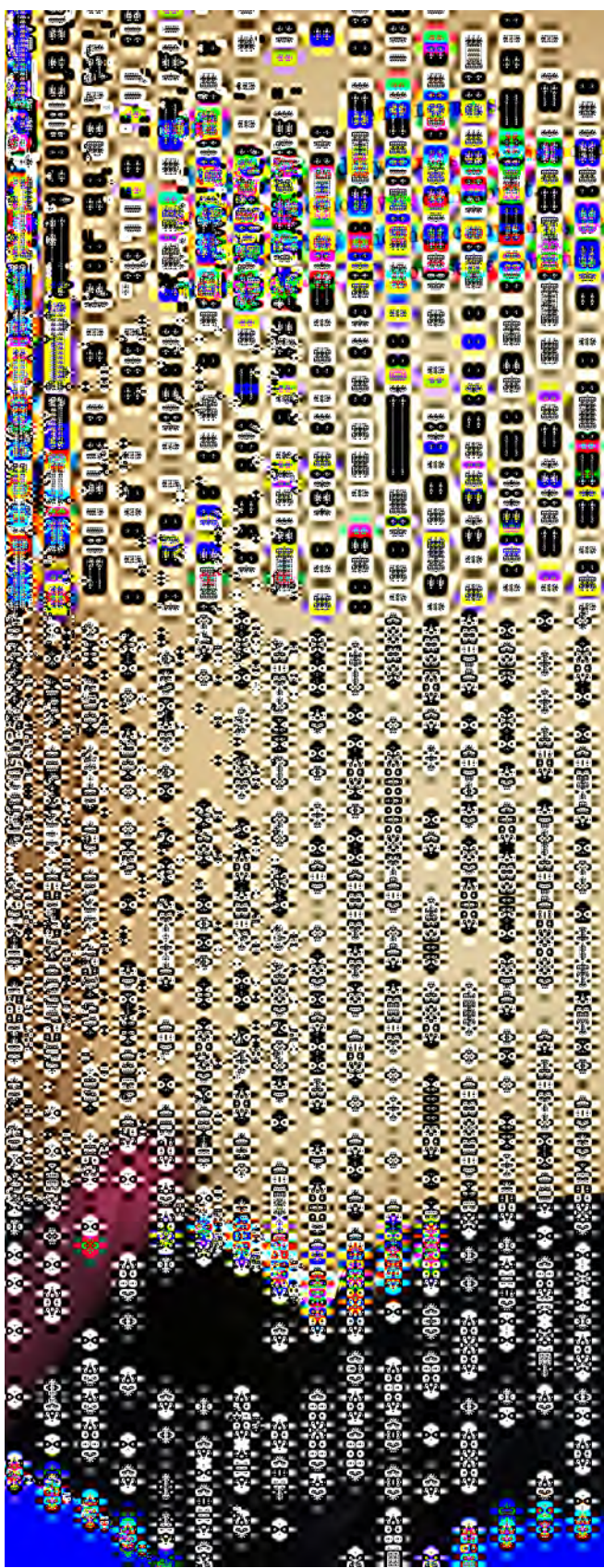
‘I cannot afford to lose you,’ said Florence, with a sigh. ‘Well, I consent; but I think you very shabby.’

‘Only give me the picture,’ replied Erle.

And Florence thereupon reluctantly resigned her treasure.



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## CHAPTER IX.

HOW HAPPY COULD I BE WITH EITHER.

Love has daily perils, such  
 As none foresees and none control;  
 And hearts are strung, so that one touch,  
 Careless or rough, may mar the whole.

A FRENCH lady, well skilled in the philosophy of the affections and the management of mankind, has thrown out an ingenious hint as to the danger of being too confidential.

‘Malheur,’ she says, ‘à l’imprudente qui demande à celui qu’elle aime le secret de ses chagrins ! Malheur à la femme qui permet à l’homme qu’elle aime de lui confier ces tourments-là. Elle perd dès ce moment la faculté de l’en distraire, et il la quittera pour aller les oublier auprès de celle qui les ignore.’

It was for some such reason as this, probably, that Florence found her empire over Erle departing from her. She knew his least agreeable mood

too well for him to be able to forget it in her presence. He was tired of the monotonous sarcasm to which her society condemned him, and of the sceptical indifference on which both met as common standing-ground. It was a view of life, true, possibly, but dull; and it was annoying to be forbidden to escape from it. Margaret possessed the rare merit of being absolutely a stranger to every idea of the kind; and, moving in an atmosphere of high spirits, interest, and enthusiasm, which it was a luxury to breathe, she attracted him by a pleasant opposition, far more piquant than the other's tedious acquiescence. Partly to annoy Florence, partly to amuse himself, Erle set himself studiously to be agreeable; and Margaret's conversation with her sister seemed to imply that he had not been entirely unsuccessful. He said things, indeed, that sounded heartless and wicked; yet they left her with but a faint impression of either cruelty or vice. His sardonic paradoxes seemed palpably unreal, and they were amusingly expressed. He criticised her songs with a feeling admiration; and spoke so ardently about his favourite airs, that it seemed impossible that he should be altogether bad. His conversation aroused an agreeable inquisitiveness and a

conscious power. His very remoteness from her put her at her ease; and she accepted his politeness with the unruffled calmness of complete indifference. That so great a man could really admire her, or that she, under any possible circumstances, could come to do more than tolerate him, it may be safely affirmed, never for a moment crossed her mind.

Such a relationship, however, admits easily of misinterpretation; and Florence, whose vanity it so sorely pricked, found no difficulty in using it to humble Margaret in her cousin's eyes. With him she had already become thoroughly intimate; and Charles, delighted at talking confidentially for the first time in his life with a woman older than himself, allowed her readily enough to touch on delicate topics. She assured herself of her standing-ground as she went, and at last made no secret of what she considered his position. He might, so her hints suggested to him, marry whichever of his cousins he chose, and Margaret, when her flirtation with Erle was disposed of, would probably wish that the choice should fall on her.

'Ah!' he said to her one day, at Underwood, 'this is the scene of our juvenile romance. I



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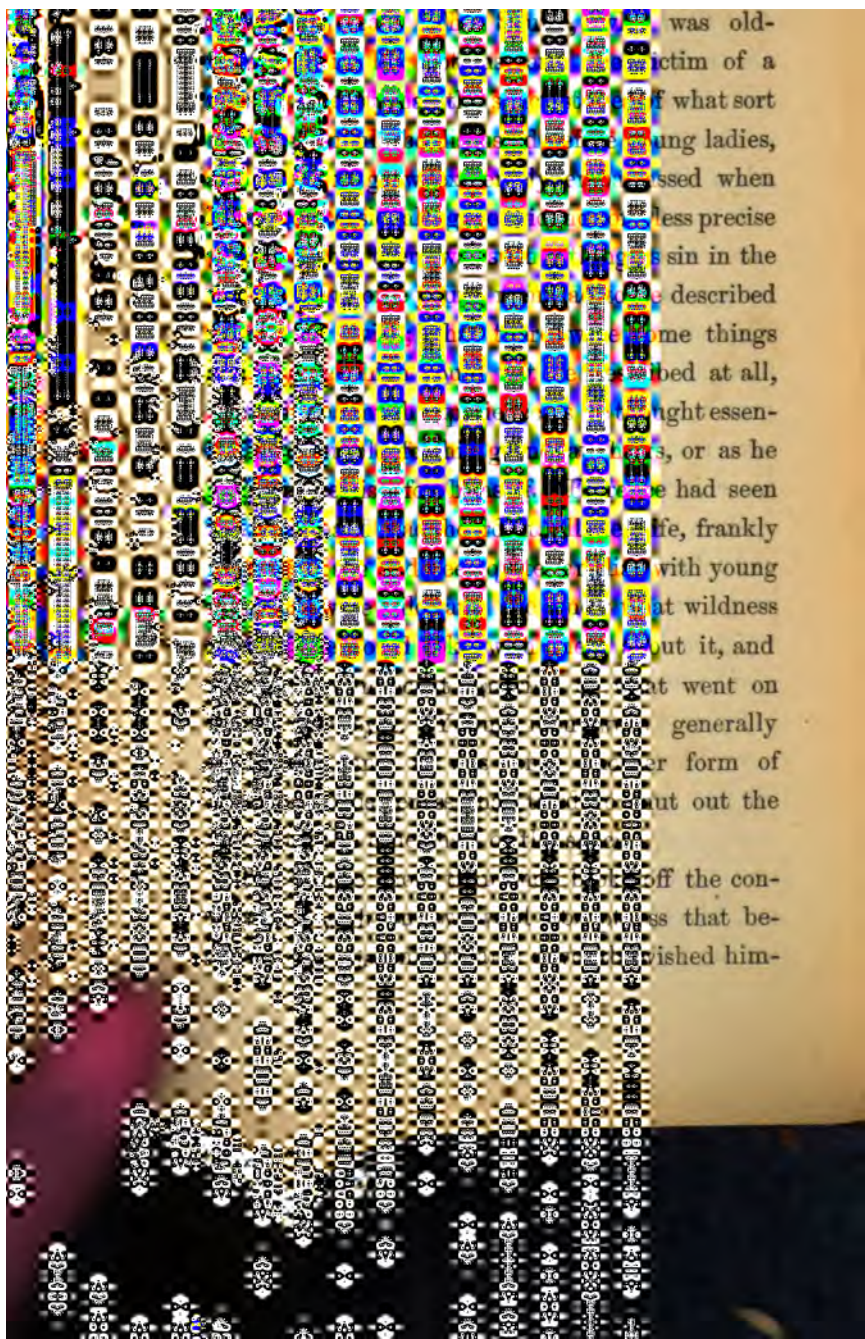
cried Florence.  
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‘The moral,’ said Florence, privately thinking that Charles’s opinion of himself was rather near the truth: ‘Take care that no rabbits jump down your throat.’

Charles, when he came to know what she meant, felt a little gratified at the discovery of so agreeable a position: it flattered his vanity, and it occurred to him that he might do well to exercise his privilege. Of another’s feelings in the matter it did not occur to him at that moment to take a thought. If fortune threw two such pieces of prey in his way, and social law forbade him to take more than one, who could be aggrieved at his enjoyment of his right? Of promises unspoken, yet truly made; of a relation too subtle and delicate for even thought to put into an explicit shape, yet none the less real; of a faithlessness, which no one could bring against him, except the silent voice of his own heart, he was too full of enjoyment just then to think. Nor indeed was his intercourse with Margaret as pleasant as of old. He was throwing himself eagerly into Florence’s mood, and Margaret constantly found herself out of tune with him. There was a delicacy about her, which he regarded as prudish; a simplicity which seemed tame, a pure-mindedness that





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self well rid of her society. Charles, on the other hand, felt there was something real, courageous, and natural about her. The Squire and his cousins lived in a little fool's paradise; but the real men and women who made the world, who fairly lived out their lives, who ran through the real course of human passion and feeling, talked in a different manner from these pretty proprieties. Florence struck the bolder note, and drowned her rival's gentle strain in a rude discord.

To such a frame of mind grievances are never wanting. Each new accident is swept into the current, and lends it a new force. Charles easily persuaded himself that he was the injured party. Erle sent him one day to a drawer, in search of a cigar, and there, stowed away with other treasures, Charles came upon the picture of his home.

'Halloa!' he cried, 'you have got the Manor house here.'

'Yes,' said Erle.

'And my cousin?'

'Which enhances its value enormously,' replied the other, completely unabashed.

'How did you get it?'

'Juvenum confidentissime,' cried Erle, with 5d



laugh; 'what a catechism you are giving me! Take your cigar, and be thankful.'

'But, seriously, how did you get it?'

'Well,' said Erle, 'if you must know, I earned it. Will that do?'

'Perfectly,' said Charles, with fury and misgiving in his heart. 'Where can I find a light?' But it was not the pipe of peace that he smoked, as he sat gloomily puffing the azure wreaths into the air, and, now that the prize seemed no longer attainable, cursing the nimble hand which had snatched it from him.

Mischance, however, had not yet exhausted her resources; and once again Charles blundered to his doom.

One day at luncheon, when he was out shooting, the conversation had turned on young men's proceedings, and Florence took the line of abusing their sex at the expense of her own.

'The mother of mankind,' suggested Erle, 'is accountable for all subsequent troubles, and her half of creation very properly has the lion's share.'

'Not at all,' said Florence; 'we are angels, but for the infection of your society. When men are eliminated, we shall become angelic again, tyou'll see.'

‘I shan’t be there to see,’ said Erle; ‘but I suppose I must believe without seeing.’

‘Just look at the difference of boys and girls,’ continued Florence. ‘Only think of boys at school, horrid little inky, mischievous, cruel imps, with not a redeeming point about them; then at college they are ten times worse—do the most atrocious things—spend quantities of money in the most foolish ways, dress themselves like senseless fops as they are, break every rule of propriety and common sense, and at last get sent home to be redeemed and civilised by our society.’

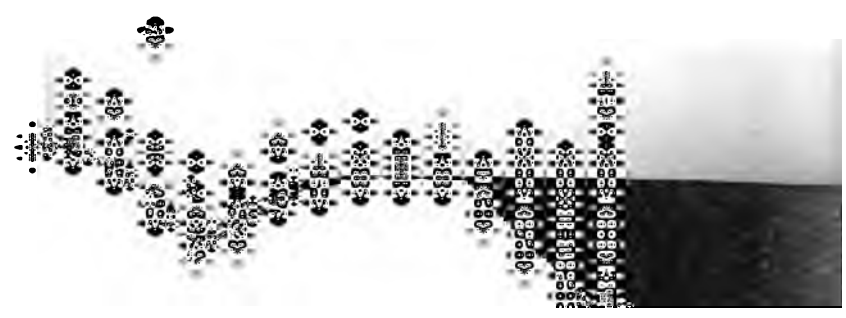
‘Bravo!’ said Erle; ‘I see you know all about it. You must have been at college yourself, Miss Vivien.’

Florence turned round, and saw Margaret blushing scarlet; she caught her eye, and the blush came deeper and deeper. Did Florence know, or was it a random shot? If the first, how insolently rude; if the second, how cruelly well the cap fitted; either alternative, how disagreeable! And so Margaret looked guilty—sat there, less and less able to speak, or to do anything in her discomfort, and Florence knew that she had hit upon a secret.

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## CHAPTER X.

## A MATCH.

Voyez-vous, ma chère, au siècle où nous sommes,  
 La plupart des hommes  
 Sont très-inconstants ;  
 Sur deux amoureux pleins d'un zèle extrême  
 La moitié vous aime  
 Pour passer le temps.

THE theatricals for which Erle's services had been so dearly purchased, came week by week to occupy a more prominent place among the Christmas festivities of the county. Florence's spirit and ability precluded any likelihood of an indifferent performance. Mrs. Vivien was certain to spare no expense in securing the due splendour of the entertainment. The Major contented himself with stipulating that, if the house was to be turned topsy-turvy, and the long library given over to carpentering and fiddlers, the sacrifice should be at any rate in a worthy cause, and that Shakspeare should receive the chief honours of the occasion.



‘By all means,’ said Florence, ‘provided we have something amusing to follow. Mr. Slap is to contrive an afterpiece for us, and we shall have a capital corps. I have secured Count Malagrida, who, I am certain, must be an admirable tragedian; and Captain Anstruther and Lord Scamperly will do well enough for inferior parts. Now, if kind Fortune would but send us some actresses!’

Florence had her wish: not even the coyness of Heavyshire reserve was proof against so alluring a temptation. Everybody, after a period of well-bred reluctance, ascertained that everybody else was going, and resolved that abstinence would be useless singularity. Even Lady Dangerfield succumbed to her daughters’ solicitations, and felt that to throw away a chance of Lord Scamperly would be almost flying in the face of a providential arrangement. Margaret, when it was proposed to her to take an active part in the proceedings, protested her incompetence too vehemently for disbelief. Nor was Florence at all seriously in need of her assistance; but to her next request she would take no refusal. She had judged *rightly, that*, could but the proper part for her be

Nelly’s pretty, frightened air, and half-

coquettish manner, would be certain to captivate the least indulgent audience; and she rejoiced, too, that Nelly should make her first appearance in society under her especial protection. The young lady herself was ardent in her entreaties, coaxed Margaret into abetting her design, and teased the Squire at last into giving a rather doubtful assent. Charles, as a matter of course, was to make himself useful should his services be required.

Thereupon Florence and Erle formed themselves into a committee of management, and—protesting in vain against the Major's restriction—began to ransack their Shakspeares for the discovery of something within the range of ordinary abilities.

'We two,' said Florence, 'shall have to bear the burthen of the day, remember. I presume you know both our characters well enough to choose something appropriate.'

'Of course,' said Erle, 'we must have nothing heroic or sentimental; the histrionic powers of both of us would break down short of that. "Hamlet" is too trite—"Antony and Cleopatra" too affectionate. Suppose we let Malagrida take Richard the Third?'

'I should have to be the Queen, and I have no

notion of being a scold,' Florence answered, laughing. 'Think, again: what a pretty Miranda our little Underwood prize might be made into.'

'No, no!' cried her companion, "'The Tempest" is a stroke beyond us, there are all sorts of mythological impossibilities at the end; not but that Scamperly might do Caliban to advantage. But stop, I have an idea at last; you shall be Beatrice, the very *rôle* of all others for which Nature intended you.'

'And you Benedick,' cried Florence; 'but it would need cleverer tricks, I assure you, than any in "Much Ado about Nothing" to cheat me out of my quarrelsome mood. However, I shall enjoy putting you down thoroughly in public.'

'I suppose we must have a drawing-room edition of it,' said Erle; 'I will tone it down to the proper key for amateur performers.'

'Very well, Benedick,' cried Florence, 'pray set to work at once. To-morrow, be prepared to find me scorn itself.'

The next morning, accordingly, Erle produced his cast of characters; and his companion confessed to having already spent two hours in realising the tones and gestures of an unassailable Beauty.

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Presently the Underwood contingent arrived—Nelly, in a quiver of excitement, and burning to know what conclusion had been arrived at.

‘The play, the performers, and the parts are decided,’ said Florence, gaily; ‘and, little Nelly, Mr. Erle has been choosing an extremely pretty one for you.’

‘I hope it is nothing difficult,’ said Nelly; ‘how do you know that I can act at all?’

‘You will scarcely have to act,’ Florence said kindly. ‘We are going to have some scenes from “Much Ado about Nothing,” and you are to be Hero. You have only to look, just what you are—a dear, good, little innocent—first, prettily reproachful, and next, forgiving and affectionate. You know the story, of course. There is your cousin for Claudio, who is deeply in love; Mr. Erle as Benedick, and I as Beatrice, who are not at all in love; and there is Leonato—a stupid part—which papa is to have; and Don John, the wicked marplot, which we have assigned to Count Malagrida, who *is* very wicked, you know, and will play it to perfection; and then, as he has got such a good voice, we are going to make him sing the song,

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more;  
Men were deceivers ever—



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be restored to her as simple, as innocent, as refined, as easy to please, as ready to love, as before her intimacy with her new friend? Who but an enemy could have so inopportunately come between them? Clyffe—so Margaret, with a half-dreary laugh, admitted to herself—had become the very bugbear of her existence; and Florence was in course of promotion from the footing of vague dislike to that of acknowledged hostility and suspicion.

Margaret's alarms would certainly not have diminished could she have known the interior of the enemy's camp, and the real tone of the life to which the two cousins were now to be familiarly introduced. Rehearsals, of course, were to be gone through, and each rehearsal necessitated an increased intimacy, gave Florence a more complete insight into the character of both, and a more thorough hold upon her protégée. Nelly's admiration was the more intense, because she only half understood a great deal of what she heard and saw. The rapid stream of brilliant talk swept noisily past her, impressed her with an increased thankfulness to her protectress and a deeper sense of her complete incapacity to take care of herself. What if Mr. Slap, who had arrived from town,

crisp with good stories, and flashing with repartee, should open his batteries upon her, and send some terrible *bon mot* to explode, shell-like, in her neighbourhood? What if Erle should, in some moment of unusual energy, pass from languid politeness into the satire for which the world in general gave him credit? What if Malagrida, with his black, mysterious eyes, and imperturbable suavity, should some day proceed to amuse himself at her expense, and annihilate her with a polished sneer? Florence, she was comforted to know, would instantly rush to arms in her defence, and would drive off the assailants from a forbidden topic of entertainment with the sharp missiles of her own unflagging wit. How not to love so gracious, so benevolent, so capable a defender? How not to reward her with the confidence of gratitude? What strange prejudice was it that blinded Margaret to the perfections of so good a friend?

Nor was Florence's kindness in the least hypocritical: she was delighted with her latest plaything. Nelly's dependence went to her heart: she loved her, too, for the success which, it soon became evident, her presence assured to the theatre. Her gracefulness, her becoming timidity,

her transparent innocence, her unconscious refinement, all made her Hero a little triumph.

‘My only anxiety,’ said Florence, with a kind laugh, ‘is, lest you should have left off those pretty blushes before the real performance comes. If you grow too courageous, my dear, I shall frighten you on purpose for the edification of the beholders.’

‘I shall be quite frightened enough,’ Nelly said, taking her patroness’s arm affectionately; ‘I declare I hardly know what I am doing when I begin to speak.’

‘Don’t you?’ cried Florence; ‘well, you are making me and everybody else fall excessively in love with you. I beg you to know that the Count, who is a first-rate judge, considers himself among your most devoted admirers.’

By this time, Nelly’s head, not very strong at the best, was beginning to be in a whirl. King Cophetua, in his royal condescension, could not have surprised the Beggar Maid with a more unexpected homage. Florence made no secret, however, that she thoroughly sympathised with Malagrida’s approval, and encouraged her in the lawful airs and graces of an acknowledged beauty. Nelly on her part, awoke to the delights of



adoration, and thrilled with the consciousness of approaching queenship. Captain Anstruther, Malagrida, her cousin—oh, how bright a place the world seemed! how pleasant society! how alarming, and yet how irresistibly attractive, the courtesies of the lords of creation!

Towards Charles, Florence's charity was far less unalloyed. Despite a pleasant good-nature, his malleability of temper excited her contempt. She smiled as she saw how he took his tone of thought from her chance expressions, and formed his tastes and sentiments upon the model she gave him. Erle liked his old friend, but soon let Florence perceive that he shared her opinion of his character. She, on her part, found him so easy of management, that the task of managing him lost half its attractiveness. 'Le beau plaisir,' she would say, 'de chasser un animal domestique. I declare I could drive him with a bit of red cloth.'

'The fiend,' cried Erle, 'might return—might he not?—

to vasty Tartar back  
And swear I never won a soul  
So easy as this Englishman's.'

'Fortunately,' said Florence, 'there are no fiends at Clyffe, or we do not know what might happen.' And yet, had she enquired of her con-

science, she might have learnt that it was no heavenly or beneficent counsellor that was driving him from his original scheme of life, and bending his infirm will to a lower, easier, less courage-tasking design.

Presently they joined the rest of the party.

‘Pray,’ asked Erle, ‘has Sir Agricola been brought to terms yet? Am I to have the honour of initiating the Miss Dangerfields into the mysteries of our theatre?’

‘You are,’ said Florence, triumphantly; ‘and a pretty battle I had to fight before Lady Dangerfield’s conscientious difficulties could be disposed of. I was obliged to fire Lord Scamperly at her head, or I should have lost the day.’

Mrs. Vivien owed her ladyship a grudge for a long list of these covert indignities, which feminine antagonists know so well how to inflict.

‘Lady Dangerfield’s difficulties!’ she cried, with a compassionating air. ‘Those poor girls are really most distressingly placed. Between piety and intrigue their mother gives them no peace.’

‘Piety!’ cried the Major, who for once entirely agreed with his wife. ‘Whenever there is a vulgar, worldly old woman, full of all the naughty

things to which her age and sex entitle her, she always tops them up with theology, and becomes entirely unendurable.'

'It is an outrage upon heaven,' said Malagrida, 'for such people to suppose that they could ever get there. Scandal, bigotry, malevolence—what ingredients, even for a Protestant saint!'

'Their devotion,' said Erle, 'is nothing but an unhallowed greediness after the good things of another life. Some people, you know, want to have everything; and a dexterous London mother contrives, of course, to have an invitation to the best and largest party ever given.'

'Lady Dangerfield has made you all quite profane,' said Mrs. Vivien; 'we must forgive her conscience this time at any rate, as Florence has stretched it over the theatricals.'

'Over Lord Scamperly, you mean,' said her daughter.

'But the result is, that we have got our two waiting-women; the Miss Dangerfields will act.'

'And I shall have to teach them,' said Erle, with a sigh. 'Ah, Miss St. Aubyn, if your sister would only help us!'

'One genius in the family is enough,' said Malagrida, hanging over the young lady with a

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paternally tender air; 'we are too thankful for Hero to wish for anything more.'

Nelly looked up with a smile of childish delight, and thought how beautiful, mysterious, and terrible a personage her new admirer looked. The Polish music-master's eyes had been strange and sad, Charles's were a lovely blue, but the Count's! they were unfathomable, fiery, searching; and Nelly felt trembling that they looked through and through her.

'The hawk and the dove!' said Erle to Anstruther, as they walked away. It makes me sick to see Malagrida affectionate to that poor little girl. If Fortune honoured me with a young and pretty wife, he is one of the last people whose acquaintance I should choose to cultivate.'

'Hawks and doves!' cried Anstruther, whose tender heart was already in a glow of enthusiasm; 'angels and devils, you mean. Come now, Erle, confess—you do enjoy teaching her her part, don't you?'

'She is not so stupid as the Miss Dangerfields, I admit,' Erle said, complacently; 'but it is a great deal of trouble.'

'Trouble!' cried the other, indignantly, 'and stupid indeed! but you are really ice.'



‘Yes,’ said Erle, ‘the very clearest, coldest, hardest Wenham Lake. Don’t you envy my frigidity?’

‘It is inhuman,’ said the other; ‘but I do not believe a word of it; but it is the other sister you admire, I know.’

‘The other is the beauty, of course,’ said Erle; ‘and has the most wit.’

‘Well!’ cried his companion, as if the force of astonishment could carry him no further. ‘Talk about infatuation!’

‘On the contrary,’ said Erle, composedly, ‘the calm verdict of an uninterested spectator.’

‘My dear fellow,’ cried the soldier, ‘you are an old fool.’

‘And you,’ rejoined Erle, ‘a young one.’

There the conversation stopped; but Anstruther resolved that his friend’s blindness admitted of only one explanation—he had fallen in love.

Before long a new excitement diverted half the attention hitherto concentrated on the theatricals. Erle had brought some horses in his train, and amongst others, the much-maligned Runnymede, by this time a favourite hunter. One afternoon, as they were riding home, discussing the fortunes of the day and the achievements of various mem-

bers of the Heavyshire Hunt, Charles, who had had the luck to be prominent throughout the run, began to grow vehement in championship of the chestnut, whose failure earlier in the season had procured him the honour of Florence's acquaintance. Erle was pleased to be sarcastic, and to deride the other's eulogium.

'Why, Evelyn,' he cried, 'confess now, did not you wait for me to knock the top off that post and rails, and make you a hole in the bullfinch, just before we killed? Even an old screw, you see, like this, may put some people to the blush.'

Runnymede was jogging along almost exhausted with the morning's exploits. All day he had been unusually vicious and troublesome, and the signs of the conflict were discernible on his tawny sides. The bullfinch had embraced him lovingly in his passage through it, and he had contrived to give his master and himself a roll into a wide and miry ditch. Altogether, he looked extremely unprepossessing, and Charles's spirits rose at the comparison.

'Upon my word,' he said, 'such an old, wicked, battered piece of obstinacy——'

'There are different objects for horses, you know,' Erle said. 'I keep mine all for going. If

I wanted a pretty hack to canter after young ladies and pick up dismounted Amazons, I should make a bid for the chestnut.'

'Come, Erle,' said the other, in a passion, 'I tell you what; we will ride them both over a couple of miles of fair country, and see which is the better horse of the two. Runnymede indeed!'

'Agreed!' said Erle. 'I shall put him into training forthwith, and you will see us do wonders. Do you know he once ran for the Derby? in honour of which I shall back him for twenty pounds.'

'I only hope he will be in one of his pretty tempers,' said Charles, 'and give you another such "brook scene" as we had this morning.'

The Squire protested against so unworthy an employment of a good hunter, but convinced at last by Charles's predictions of victory, warmed heartily into the idea; and Margaret, soon becoming an enthusiastic partisan, made daring wagers with all her friends on the chestnut's success.

'You would like to ride him yourself, would you not, Margaret?' said the Squire, as they halted their ponies, and watched Charles giving his horse

a morning gallop round the confines of the park, as he came across the valley and swept at last over the flight of hurdles to where they were standing.

‘I shall be broken-hearted if Charles does not win,’ she said; ‘but of course he will. Mr. Erle’s horse, grandfather, is a perfect fright.’

Margaret’s zeal touched her cousin, and was the signal for a tacit reconciliation. He had left Nelly the day before at Clyffe, and in her absence the two relapsed, almost unconsciously, into their former communicativeness, intimacy, and affection. Charles forgot the interval of estrangement,—the suspicions which, though not quite harboured, had not been quite expelled,—the doubts which he had left unanswered, the moods in which Margaret’s very excellences were a source of irritation. His old fondness came upon him with the pathos of remembered neglect. Margaret’s high spirits were something pleasanter than the hard, bright merriment of the Vivien party. His grandfather seemed so much more thorough a gentleman than the Major. The illusion of novelty, the piquancy of contrast, had died away, and even Clyffe, he found, could be sometimes monotonous and unattractive. Florence, the last time he had been there, had



shocked him by some piece of cynicism a shade coarser than usual. Nelly was deep in a rather foolish flirtation with a train of admirers. The clever people were occasionally snappish, morose, or too indolent to be agreeable. Erle had more than once turned the laugh against him, and the Clyffe laughs were by no means charitable. Mr. Slap, when quite at ease, fell below the Slap-ian standard, and was simply dull. The absence of sentiment made everything depend on fun, and when the fun collapsed, the house was dreariness itself. On the whole, though the tinsel was well laid on, Charles's instinct began to teach him that it was not gold. One or two pleasant evenings at Underwood completed his conversion. What was it, he began to wonder, that, when all things favoured his proposal, had forced him to hesitate? Why was it that the boon for which he had longed so eagerly was still unasked? Nelly had charmed him, but the fascination died away as he left her presence. Margaret's features haunted him in his dreams. With the one he grew fond, but never intimate; the other seemed to read his thoughts. Nelly amused his fancy, her sister mastered his heart.

Margaret was woman enough to feel a little

triumph at his return. Florence had done her worst, she felt assured, and done it in vain. The Clyffe armoury had been exhausted against him, and still her cousin was the same. How the world brightened around her at the thought!

‘You will be spoilt for a quiet life, I am afraid,’ the Squire said, as, the night before the race, Charles was recounting the splendour of the Clyffe preparations. ‘What can we think of to amuse you? You will find us sadly dull.’

‘Never!’ said Charles, vehemently, and looking at his cousin. ‘Do I look tired of my home? I never felt less like it, I assure you. You should have seen how indignant the Dangerfields were with me for coming!’

‘Well,’ said the Squire, as he settled himself at a distant table with a book, ‘take care, I advise you: private theatricals are dangerous things.’

Charles lowered his voice for his cousin’s ear alone.

‘My dangers,’ he said, ‘lie nearer home.’

A simple phrase enough, but speaker and hearer alike knew its meaning. Margaret felt a load suddenly lifted from her heart. Coldness and uncertainty on his part, secret grief and disquietude on hers, were now about to end. Not till the

relief was promised did she know how keen the pain, how heavy the burthen which, unavowed even to herself, she had been of late enduring. What a treasure of devotion, stored up in innocent fidelity, a single word or look may awaken into consciousness and life!

The Squire read on, Margaret began to play, and Charles, pleased to have said so much, and yet half frightened at his own temerity, sat dreamingly beating time to the music, and pondering over his latest move. He had said but a few words, and those conveniently indistinct. The compliment, such as it was, would have applied to the one sister as well as the other; yet conscience told him that enough had been done. He felt that Margaret, if uninformed before, now knew his heart, and that, should his present mood prove transient, he was still pledged to it; if ever the chain which his own hand had just fitted to his neck should come to gall him, he had no more the right to throw it off. The very suspicion of such a possibility was alarming; and Charles, like a coward as he was, felt even now the hesitation which is the first step to repentance.

The next morning the three drove together to the meadows where the race was to take place.

‘Upon my word,’ said the Squire, as Charles made his appearance, glittering in pink and white, ‘you look quite the reverse of respectable. Pray wrap yourself up in your great coat, and let no one see what freaks I am abetting; and I really think there has been a frost — the poor chestnut’s legs!’

‘The poor riders’ necks!’ cried Charles with a laugh; ‘but no, grandfather, the ground will be beautiful by twelve o’clock.’

And so it proved. Before noon there was a goodly crowd collected at the scene of action. The day was bright, soft, and cloudless. Anstruther and the Count had been busy all the morning in deciding upon the course, and were still marching about the fields, followed by a train of men with flags and hatchets. A ditch had been dammed up into a very respectable brook, quite enough, as Erle’s friends cheerfully observed, to insure anyone who chose a thorough ducking. The Clyffe party naturally assembled in force; most of the neighbouring houses contributed spectators; the gallant H. H. was duly represented. A dozen carriages were drawn up on a knoll favourable for commanding a view of the race. The two principal performers, carefully



enveloped from chilly air, were being paraded about by their grooms. Runnymede, evidently conscious that something unusual was expected of him, was already doing his best to disturb the harmony of the day, and filled his supporters with the blackest misgivings. Warned by his reverted eye and ready heels, the inquisitive crowd followed him at a respectful distance, and exchanged in safety such unflattering pleasantries as his past exploits and personal appearance suggested. On the whole, though Erle's prowess was acknowledged, the popular opinion was that he must come to grief, and would certainly win no laurels from the present encounter.

Presently Florence with the Major and Nelly rode up. Nelly carried off her grandfather to see the course, and Florence, weary with her ride, accepted the vacant seat beside Margaret. Erle was not long in making his appearance.

'I am afraid, Miss St. Aubyn,' he said, 'that I have no good wishes from you; of course the Underwood interest carries all before it; but let me show you where we are to go. You see the tent there on the hill; well, that is the starting-place; we come down the valley, across that fence where the flag is, and then in the next field is the

brook where my enemies predict my fall. By sitting here, you see, you will have an excellent view of my discomfiture, and your cousin will probably gallop past you without the trouble of my company.'

'That will be very uninteresting,' said Margaret. 'I beg you will show fight all through, and only be beaten in the last field.'

'I shall do my best to obey you, you may be sure,' said Erle; 'and now we must all have some gambling. I will be courageous, Miss St. Aubyn, and bet you anything you like to nothing in support of my much-decried steed: I see you are despising him already, like the rest of the world.'

Erle stood by her side of the carriage, and seemed almost to forget the presence of her companion. Florence had never felt his partiality with such unpleasing distinctness. It was bad enough to be neglected, but to be neglected openly was more than she could bear.'

'Stop, Mr. Erle,' she cried, 'and arrange my bets for me.' But Runnymede was already stripped, and no more time was to be lost. Even as she spoke, her old admirer had turned and gone without a word. Next, Charles rode up, in full-

More colour, followed by a little crowd of admirers. Florence felt impatiently that it was not for her sake that he came.

'Your blessing on your knight,' he cried, moving towards his cousin's side.

'And my knight's horse,' said Margaret, stretching from the carriage to pat the chestnut's glittering neck. 'Ride, Charley, for the glory of Underwood. I have staked a fortune on your victory.'

'Never fear!' cried her cousin; and then he stooped down and whispered something in her ear, which Florence would have given worlds to catch, but which she was evidently not intended to overhear. Her rival, she felt, was having all the honours of the day to herself. She smiled—but a dark cloud lowered on her brow, and darker thoughts still tossed and swelled angrily in her troubled mind.

A few moments more, and a shout from the crowd, and a sudden dispersion of the group that had gathered at the starting-place, showed that the race had begun. Both followed it without difficulty; and Florence, absorbed, forgot for a moment her rankling animosity in the excitement of an evenly-balanced contest.

Neck to neck the two horses came sweeping along the valley's side; almost abreast they flew across the second fence; stride by stride they crossed the wide meadow and neared the critical obstacle of the race. At this point the posture of affairs began to change. Erle, with a view to bettering his chance of getting quietly across, took care to be ten yards behind as they approached the brook. That over or into this his horse should go, he had quite made up his mind, and Runnymede apparently had become aware of the necessity, for he had put down his head, was shaking it impatiently at Erle's firm holding, and was going as though life and death depended upon his being across the water as soon as his rival. Now the chestnut, though a pretty hunter, was young, inexperienced, and apprehensive; and though he performed gallantly in the hunting-field, amid a crowd of horses, and with the crash of hounds, his courage misgave him as he found himself spinning along without assignable motive—the foremost, if not alone—at the cold, bright, clearly-marked piece of water, which the Clyffe hedgers and ditchers had been so busy for days past in helping to its present growth. Each stride, as he approached it, gave



evidence of faltering nerves and increased indecision. Charles, his blood now at boiling heat with the prospect of victory, and in no hesitating mood, plied his spurs vehemently, held his horse's head relentlessly straight, and before the chestnut's mind was half made up, he found himself already half-way across. His last spring, however, had a dash of reluctance in it, and served but to land half his body on the opposite bank. 'An awful sound of water in his ears,' a sudden descent into the mud, a frantic struggle, a lurch to one side, and—crash came Runnymede from behind, with all the accumulated impetus of half a mile's racing gallop: over rolled the chestnut, down went Charles: Runnymede in an instant was standing on his nose with the tail to the sky; Erle was spinning into a chaos in which conflicting legs, heads, saddles, were confusedly jumbled in disagreeable proximity to his own skull. Florence sprang to her feet the better to observe the catastrophe: and Margaret, sitting speechless and rigid, and clutching unconsciously at her companion's hand, for an instant drew her attention to herself. Florence read in her scared looks the agony of a sudden terror.

'No one is killed,' she said, with a touch of scorn: and turning her glass once more toward the central figures of the scene.

But Margaret had no eyes or thoughts for any but a single point of the proceedings. She could distinctly follow each new phase. Erle was the first upon his legs, and hurried to his fallen comrade's assistance. Runnymede, with perverse incongruity, had set himself composedly to graze, and was watching with stormy, vigilant eye, the crowd of small boys who rashly tried to catch him. The chestnut was slowly collecting his scattered faculties, and wondering what in the world had befallen him. Meantime a little cluster had gathered round Charles, who lay flat out on his back, picturesque, mud-bespattered, and inanimate.

Margaret sat in silent horror. What did not depend for her on the revelations of the next few minutes! How tragical a catastrophe had perhaps already befallen her! Charles killed! Her heart died down within her at the possibility. What would the world be without him! Her anxiety was shortlived, for her cousin presently sat up, and in a quarter of an hour was perfectly restored. For the sake of the spectators, and to

prove that no harm was done, they resolved to continue the race. Margaret bit her lip, and strove in vain to conceal her distress at the resolution. Presently both horses were for half a field out of sight.

‘Why,’ said Florence, turning round for the first time; ‘how white you look! Ah! here is Mr. Erle again.’

But Margaret’s nerve was gone; each new jump, waited for before with pleasurable excitement, cost her an agony of expectation. She clenched her hand, resolved at any price on self-command; but it was almost too much to bear. Once and again, with no ostensible reason, she hid her face in her hands, and burst into half hysterical tears.

‘Ah,’ cried Florence, sitting down in the carriage with an air of triumph, as a shout from the crowd proclaimed the conclusion of the race; ‘Runnymede is the conqueror, and I have won—let me see—but, my dear Miss St. Aubyn, you must be surely ill.’

‘Not at all,’ said her companion, the tears again rushing to her eyes; ‘but it gave me a fright—it is ridiculous, I know. I shall be better presently.’

‘Well,’ said Florence, this time with undisguised .

contemptuousness in her tone; 'pray do not cry, at any rate, there are no bones broken. I cannot fancy being so frightened at a fall.'

Margaret was hardly mistress of herself, nor in a mood to weigh her words.

'Cannot you?' she said. 'Then you never had any one you loved in danger.'

'No,' rejoined the other; 'not any one I *loved*; I sympathise with you, I am sure.' There was that in the emphasis of the sentence that recalled Margaret to herself at once; she looked sharply up, for the tone of Florence told her that war was meant. The insinuation scarcely admitted of a reply: nor, if it had, did Margaret feel capable of attempting it. Florence had meant the suggestion as a simple rudeness. Fortune had turned it into something more. She saw by the other's expression of mute perplexity and endurance that she was helpless, and that her random shot had pierced her antagonist's armour at a vulnerable point. 'So,' she said to herself afterwards, as she rode silently home, 'so she really loves him.'



## CHAPTER XI.

## MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

— Who is so gross  
That cannot see this palpable device?

THAT night there was to be a rehearsal at Clyffe: Margaret drove back alone with her grandfather, and Charles's visits to his home for the next few days were too hurried and business-like for confidential intercourse. His hesitating will welcomed any decent pretext for delay, and it seemed only reasonable, now the Vivien's party would so soon break up, to delay the great step of his life to a time of quiet, leisure, and thoughtfulness. Perhaps the consciousness of his own treacherous vacillation—the possibility, dimly foreseen, and only for an instant entertained, of a breach of faith, the uneasy foreboding of a struggle between honour and inclination—reconciled him to such brief and scanty communications as the circumstances rendered excusable, but which would have

seemed mere tantalising drops to the thirsty lips of a hearty lover. Perhaps, too, Margaret's embarrassment betrayed itself in an unaccustomed reserve. Florence had almost openly taxed her with being in love with her cousin, and she had begun to know for the first time that she really was. The knowledge, while Charles's wishes remained in ambiguity, was extremely distressing. How far, she asked herself, had her manner betrayed her thoughts? How most effectually, for the future, could she conceal what was destined perhaps to be for ever a secret? Had she read her cousin's looks, words, tones aright? or was the happiness she already felt her own, a foolish dream? Suppose—suppose—but her whole nature shrank back at the imagined catastrophe. To the last we are incredulous of misfortune. Upon the whole, however, Margaret confessed to herself that she was miserable.

Loud were the outcries at Clyffe, vehement the indignation, when Erle, only three days before the final performance, suddenly declared that he must go to town. Florence had for days past watched his flagging zeal, and denounced his departure as a mere idle manœuvre. Was it that the Miss Dangerfields were slow to learn and

prompt to forget, and insisted, despite all instruction, on a rendering of their parts altogether peculiar to themselves? Was it that Slap had exhausted all his stock of stories, and gave himself airs about his afterpiece? Was it a growing dislike of Florence and her relatives that suggested ever, with increasing cogency, the delights of an interval of independence?

‘Business,’ said Erle, shutting up his letter at breakfast, and looking as serious as possible—‘business of the most imperative kind. A single afternoon will do. I will be back to-morrow.’

‘It is too unkind,’ said Florence, despairing. ‘Nobody but you, Mr. Erle, could have hit upon such a provoking expedient. Come back early, pray: I shall want you for a hundred things.’

‘Can you get up by eleven?’ said the Major. ‘If so, you can be at Sandyford by two, and we will send to meet you.’

Erle, however, preferred to trouble no one. ‘I shall leave my horse at the station,’ he said, ‘and ride back again to-morrow. You may expect me by three; and I expect you all to be diligent in my absence. When the Underwood people come, pray put them through their parts. Evelyn is certain to break down.’

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‘How vain he is!’ cried Florence, still in a pet. ‘Indeed, Mr. Erle, we shall do extremely well without you.’

The performers promised to make the best of their time, and Erle rode away in secret triumph.

Now the road to the station ran across Underwood Common, and by the gates of the Manor: and Erle, as he passed, looking up the avenue, caught sight of the house and a sunny garden path, and the Squire and Margaret marching up and down in confidential talk, and was seized with a sudden fancy to bring his London expedition there and then to an immediate close. Mr. Evelyn and he were the best of friends, Margaret looked extremely picturesque, and the excuse of bringing tidings from Clyffe would satisfactorily explain an unexpected call. He half checked his horse; but prudence and propriety for once carried the day. No other train would take him in reasonable time to town; he was already full late; he dare not reappear at Clyffe with his journey unfulfilled, and so acknowledge its needlessness. Forbidden fruits, however, are sweet, and the consciousness that one may not taste sometimes is the first incentive to desire. Erle, though he had never thought of it before, now resented the

circumstances and the people that forbade the indulgence of a whim. Clyffe, as he thought it over, seemed more wearisome than ever; Florence was really insufferable; the acting, after weeks of trouble, atrocious even for amateurs; Slap's prologue, a mere piece of buffoonery: in a few days half a county would be witnessing his disgrace as a manager. In what weak moment had he been tricked into so much unprofitable toil? How provoking that it should now defraud him of what would have been a real enjoyment!

The next day, as he passed on his journey back to Clyffe, fortune spared him the necessity of choice; for the Squire and Margaret were half way down the avenue on their way to the village, and escape, even had he wished it, was out of the question. Never, however, was a more willing prisoner caught. Erle soon let his horse be sent to the stables, came in to luncheon, and, with a half malevolent satisfaction at the inconvenience his delay would occasion, calmly banished the theatricals from his thoughts. Charles and Nelly, so Margaret told him, had just started; she and her grandfather were to follow the next evening. The Squire was inclined to be talkative, and Erle set assiduously

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about making himself agreeable. Margaret, watching her grandfather's mood, welcomed the arrival of an opportune companion; conversation flowed pleasantly on; Erle launched heroically into old-fashioned politics, quoted Mr. Pitt's speeches and Lady Mary Wortley Montague's letters, and listened with resigned good-nature while the Squire described some famous debates in which he had participated when he sat for the county. At last they agreed to go out to the woods, where cutting was in progress.

'I am very sorry that anyone should see how ruthless you can be,' said Margaret. 'Mr. Erle, my grandfather, you must know, has a mania for destructiveness, and cuts down all my favourite trees.'

'Nonsense, Margaret,' said her grandfather. 'Was it not Selwyn, Mr. Erle, who called trees mere excrescences, that grow out of the earth to pay people's debts with?'

'A most lovely pine,' cried Margaret, undisturbed; 'the chief feature in the view, and the greatest possible protection in windy weather.'

'We must have air,' said the Squire, who had been reading the Report of the Ladies' Sanitary Committee, and lived in chronic terror of suffocation.

'I appeal to Mr. Erle's taste,' said Margaret: and so all three went out to the dovecot tree.

Erle thought gleefully of the rehearsal that was going on without him, and congratulated himself on his escape. Dim visions of the Miss Dangerfields flitted before his mind's eye. The society in which he found himself was a new sensation. He saw plainly that it never entered Margaret's head to care in the least about him, and he liked her for it. She wanted her grandfather to be amused, and so she liked Erle to stay, just as she would have ordered Punch round to the windows if that had been the Squire's fancy. Erle contrasted her with the tribe of self-seeking, ambitious pleasure-hunters to whom he was going—Florence's intrigue, the Major's epicurean indifference, Mrs. Vivien's laborious worldliness, Scamperly leering like a little Satyr, Malagrida's smooth manners and black heart—and rode away at last, in a serious, regretful mood, as if quitting Paradise and bound for Pandemonium.

He was received at Clyffe with a volley of interrogations. Florence upbraided him with his faithlessness. 'Of course,' some one suggested, 'he was too late for the morning train.' 'Or,'

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said another, 'is there the usual break-down at the Sandyford Junction?'

Erle said, negligently, 'No'—that he had been kept——

'I dare say,' put in Florence, turning with a laugh to Nelly; 'he called at Underwood to pay his respects to you, and found you fled.'

'Excellent excuse,' cried Erle; 'I wish I had thought of it.'

'No?' said Nelly. 'Were you there, Mr. Erle?'

'You hear what Miss Vivien says,' answered the other. 'She is never wrong, you know.'

There was not the least suggestion of truthfulness in his manner, and no one thought of it again till the evening. The weather was cold, and the long corridor unwarmed. Florence wanted to go and see if some carpentering in the theatre was being properly done.

'Pray, wrap yourselves up,' Mrs. Vivien said, with a shudder; 'the corridor is full of draughts.'

'We shall not care,' said Nelly, much too excited to think about cold or heat.

'Let me,' said Malagrida to Nelly, 'wrap you up in this cloak. One always catches cold when one is tired, and you have been so hard at work.'

'No,' said Nelly, with a pretty petulance,

‘take it to Miss Dangerfield: she has been of the greatest use to us all day.’

‘We must take care of the Beautiful,’ said the Count, gallantly, ‘and the Useful will take care of itself. The remark is Göthe’s, but I am quite of the same opinion.’

Erle went and brought her a Scotch plaid.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘I am going to insist on your wearing this. You forget that you are the heroine of to-morrow night, and meanwhile extremely valuable. Besides, do you know, I was especially charged this morning to take care of you.’

‘Were you?’ said Nelly, surprised. ‘Who charged you?’

‘Yes,’ said Florence, turning from where she stood in front, and fixing her eyes on Charles, to see that the answer made a due impression.

‘Miss St. Aubyn,’ said Erle. ‘You will submit to me now, I hope.’

‘Then you were at Underwood?’

‘Of course,’ said Erle, with a laugh. ‘I have been telling you so all day.’

Florence watched the paleness that crept over Charles’s cheek, and felt triumphantly that defeat was not even now absolutely impossible.

Mr. Evelyn and Margaret did not arrive till

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late next day. The house was crowded with guests, and from top to bottom was in a whirl of excitement. Florence seemed the animating spirit of the whole, but overwrought, confident, and unfeminine—more than ever, Margaret resolved to herself, a distasteful companion. The conversation seemed harsh, noisy, and out of tune with the quiet courtesy to which her grandfather's house accustomed her. Mr. Slap was assigned to her at dinner, and found her, she was conscious, extremely unentertaining. She tried in vain to feel interested in the London gossip, beyond which it compromised his dignity to stir. It was a relief when the moment for departure arrived. Later on in the evening some of the gentlemen established themselves at whist, and Florence became the centre of a party of listeners gathered about the pianoforte.

‘ You know,’ she said to one of the new comers, ‘ we are not to be exclusively classical to-morrow. Having done justice to Shakspeare in the early part of the entertainment, we devote the rest of the evening to something original. Everybody admits that in “ Old Lovers and New ” Mr. Slap has quite outdone himself. I have a nice part, middle-aged, respectable, but sentimental; Count



Malagrida is to look as nearly virtuous as he conveniently can; and we are to be a steady-going old couple, holding our own, in the way of romance, against the young people. It was so kind of you not to object to being respectable, Count Malagrida.'

'If you consent to be middle-aged,' said the Count, 'why should I? For such old people, I must say Mr. Slap has given us a great deal of flirtation.'

'Yes,' said Florence; 'I am to bring him flowers on his birthday, and we are both to behave as absurdly as if we were little cooing turtle-doves of eighteen and twenty-two, instead of—'

'Spare us the contrast,' said the Count, deprecatingly. 'My song about the flowers is, I assure you, quite pathetic.'

'Let us rehearse it at once,' said Florence, sitting down at the piano; and so the Count, who had a beautiful, tremulous, feeling voice, began to sing:—

•      *AIR—Cinquante Ans.*

A bouquet for my birthday? No—  
Birthdays, alas! by each I'm told  
*How* years steal on—how fast I grow  
Much more than half a century old.

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What wrinkles come, what whitening hairs!  
 What aches! how vainly does one strive  
 To banish by one's youthful airs  
 The thought that one is fifty-five!

Our pleasures fail—our bones grow brittle:  
 Each passing season adds a fetter—  
 But hark, a knock!—'Tis Doctor Little  
 To see if my lumbago's better.  
 The doctor! once I should have said  
 There's Lillian, maddest girl alive,  
 With some sweet nonsense in her head—  
 But now, you see, I'm fifty-five.

A knock—a guest I can't deny—  
 I'm with you, sir, in half a minute;  
 Light, Air, and pleasant World, good-bye!  
 Good-bye, the joys I've tasted in it!  
 'Tis Death, who standing at the gate,  
 Provoked to find me still survive,  
 Declares that he'll no longer wait  
 For an old boy of fifty-five!

But no—dear, constant friend—'tis you;  
 Still mine, as when we roamed together,  
 And vowed, yet children, to be true  
 In altered times and stormy weather.  
 Still travel with me to the last,  
 Still smile though Fortune's worst arrive,  
 And, for the sake of all the past,  
 Still love me—though I'm fifty-five.

The Count's soft tenor died pathetically away,  
 and a buzz of admiration broke out as the closing  
 notes expired in a shake.

'Excellent!' said Florence, triumphantly.

‘Count Malagrida, you are a treasure; and though “you’re fifty-five,” are worth all the young men put together, I assure you.’

‘You are very encouraging,’ said the Count, gratefully: ‘not that I suppose any of one’s friends will really stick by one as long as that; but a life is such an atrocious piece of business, that one must needs idealise it a little.’

‘Yes,’ said Erle, who had by no means recovered his good spirits, and was quite prepared to grumble at anything; ‘why does one endure it at all?’

‘Why?’ cried Malagrida, ‘cowardice, idleness, and superstition—the three keys to all terrestrial enigmas.’

‘No,’ said Slap: ‘a sense of justice. Suicide is a mean advantage upon one’s neighbours, just like slipping away from a dull party on a false excuse. It is only by everybody staying and making the best of it that one gets through it at all.’

‘Who was it,’ asked Florence, ‘that compared life to a house on fire with a sentinel posted at the door? One would escape if one dared, but one cannot face the sentinel, and dares not jump out of *the* window.’

‘And yet,’ said Erle, ‘escape is an easy affair after all. There was some strong-minded young lady, you may remember, who said she was at a loss to conceive why moralists laid so much stress on teaching people how to die, for that all her friends seem to succeed admirably well the first time they tried.’

‘What is that about a house on fire?’ asked Anstruther of Florence. ‘Why, Miss Vivien, was I not reading to you only yesterday that life is a progress—the march of a great general—here a battle, there a disaster, but still on.’

‘A professional simile,’ cried Malagrida, ‘hot from the Horse Guards. Progress, indeed! call it a march home from Moscow — one long disaster.’

‘Progress!’ said Slap, with the greatest disdain; ‘and Fate, I suppose like an unpitying policeman, continually telling the human species to move on—’

‘And play its barrel-organ in the next street,’ suggested Florence, laughing. ‘Well, when one thinks of it, what a big place the world is!’

‘Yes,’ said Erle; ‘and if we are to be profound, what a number of people in it—ever so many millions, you know, dying and being born

every minute! Each generation but a ripple on the ocean.'

'Nonsense,' cried Florence. 'I never believe anything that disturbs my complacency with my species and myself. Man is the centre of the universe.'

'And Miss Vivien the centre of humanity,' said Malagrida.

'What do you think of us?' Erle asked, dropping out of the conversation, and speaking for Margaret's ear alone. 'It is a cheerful philosophy, is it not?'

'It is an ice-palace,' said Margaret—'glittering, but cold to live in.'

'And in reality only mud and water,' answered her companion. 'Discontent raised to the dignity of a science; but that way of talking is infectious.'

'Pray do not infect me,' cried Margaret. 'I prefer to think life interesting.'

'In fact,' said Erle, 'you believe in "the best of all possible worlds."'

'I believe,' answered the other, 'in its being a better world than one fancies when one is vexed or tired.'

Charles, with furtive glance and lowering brow,

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watched the dialogue without catching its import, and threw the reins on the neck of a suspicious mood. Erle was summoned to the whist-table, and Florence, interested in the conversation, and in far too high spirits for weariness, kept the group of talkers in full activity. To Margaret it seemed as though the party would never break up. Minute by minute she began to shrink more from her companions. The utter uncongeniality of the ruling spirits of the house affected her with a strange and miserable sense of isolation. The words fell from their lips hard, merciless, bright, and cold: and they struck a chill to her heart. Even her kinsfolk seemed under the spell, and half alienated. Nelly sat wrapped in a childish wonderment. Charles caught the fashionable tone of the moment, and contributed his icicle to the general glitter. He was no longer the simple, frank, tender friend with whom she had been so confidential but a week before. Was it that the fascination was strong, she asked herself, or was his nature so strangely unresisting that a few days' fresh companionship should be able thus to work a change? Was this the character to which, more than to any other in the world, she would fain have looked for strength, guidance, and reliability?

Was this the man whom Florence knew she loved?

With doubts like these gathering over her mind, the banter of some, the gossip of others, the cynicism of all became almost unendurable. Her very brain seemed racked with weariness. The longing for escape into solitude grew strong upon her. Self-restraint became increasingly difficult: to join naturally in the conversation less and less possible. Still it went on, and at last she could bear it no longer. One or two of the party had already departed, and watching a favourable moment when the general attention was fixed on Malagrida, she whispered to Florence that she should slip away.

‘Pray do not,’ said the other: ‘it will be the signal for a general desertion.’

Margaret pleaded a headache, and passed from the room unobserved. Florence, in another instant, was once more deep in the controversy.

Delighted to have escaped, with a joyful sense of relief thrilling through her, Margaret hurried across the hall, and was turning already toward the staircase, when the flood of clear, still light that streamed through the glass doors, and lit up half the wall, caused her to linger for an instant

to admire the silent splendour of the glistening scene outside. The moon was at the full, and the sky—but for here and there a block of slowly-travelling cloud—intensely bright. Wind there was none, and the almost motionless air had just a tinge of frostiness that whitened all the landscape, and intensified the lustre overhead. Down in the valley, and like a little lake, a film of vapour marked the river's course. Far across, in some remote farm-house, a sleepless dog was baying at the moon. Each sound fell sharp and distinct upon the ear. Margaret stood entranced with pleasure. It seemed to her that she had never known the full loveliness of night till now. What more efficacious remedy for such perturbed spirits as hers than Nature here proffered to her thirsty lips? Strength, confidence, and equanimity once again took possession of her mind. As she stood and gazed, the drawing-room door opened, and a gush of noisy conversation fell rudely upon her ear. Florence's laugh, high, scornful, pitiless; Mr. Slap exploding into a noisy joke; Major Vivien's half-jovial tones—each she fancied distinguishable—all equally unattractive. Compared with these how perfectly exquisite the peace, the silence, the tranquillity of the scene

outside. But next came approaching steps and merry wishings of good-night in the doorway.

'Pray,' some one was saying, 'are you one of the victims to-morrow?'

'Do you mean as listener or a performer?' Florence asked from inside the room.

'Quevedo,' said Slap, 'said that the punishment of fiddlers in hell was to sit and listen while the other fiddlers played. I confess if one must make a choice, I would rather fiddle than hear.'

Margaret knew that the speakers were approaching her, and in an other instant escape would be impossible. She felt as if she dare not confront them. Already the staircase was cut off, for she must cross their path to gain it. Flight was, however, still within her reach. She snatched a shawl from the table, tried the handle of the door, found that it was still unfastened, and in another instant was in the open air, beyond the pillars of the porch, and in safety.

The night was exhilarating, the consciousness of having eluded the enemy stirred the spirit of adventure, and Margaret's spirit rose within her. She drew a long draught of the clear, frosty air, and it seemed like inspiring nectar. The terrace, *completely* sheltered, and safe from all invasion,

seemed tempting for a moonlight walk. Several guests had yet to go, whose carriages would not be ordered till the whist was over. She ran no risk of being shut out. The delicious chill brought her hot brow an almost instant relief. Return would be safer ten minutes hence than now. Margaret resolved to go. She wandered on, and soon reached the terrace end. A broad flight of steps led downward to the gardens, wrapped in a mysterious haze. Beyond stretched the firwoods pitch black, except where silvered by the rime. A towering mass of ivied wall threw a deep shadow upon her path. A cloud crept slowly across the moon, and blotted out half the landscape's glory. The river poured on, and raged about the lasher and beneath the garden bridge with a sullen moan. Margaret felt a melancholy gather at her soul: her courage died down as an inward voice—the sudden birth, perhaps, of overwrought frame or troubled nerves—whispered of impending catastrophe, and filled her with a causeless awe. She turned to go, but was conscious, as she turned, that she was no longer alone. Some one was approaching from the house. A dark form and the tiny spark of a cigar were alone discernible in the deceptive glimmer. The new comer, whoever it



was, unconscious of Margaret's neighbourhood, strode carelessly half-way down the walk, turned abruptly off at a side gate, and was lost to view. Margaret, in a flutter of spirits that seemed to her strangely childish, and sad at heart—she knew not why—regained the house.

Meanwhile, Florence, still loath to depart, stood behind her father and watched the play.

‘But where is Mr. Erle?’ she cried. ‘I thought you carried him off to play.’

‘So we did,’ said Scamperly, ‘but he was too sleepy for anything, and I believe pretty nearly ruined Sir Agricola; at his last revoke we sent him away to enjoy himself philosophically with a pipe in the garden.’

‘You have all a good right to be tired,’ cried the Major. ‘If Erle had known his trade as manager he would have sent you all upstairs two hours before this.’

Thereupon the ladies departed: and Nelly, escorted by Florence to her bedroom, was astonished to find that her sister had not yet appeared. While they were still wondering, Margaret hurried in breathless from the keen air out of doors.

‘I have been upon the terrace,’ she said; ‘look, Nelly, what a lovely night it is.’

Nelly and Florence both looked, and they were yet standing at the window, when they heard a garden-gate slam, a footstep on the crisp gravel, that came nearer and nearer out of the gloom. At last a form emerged into the light. Florence laid her finger on her lips, and whispered—‘Mr. Erle!’

And so it was.

The next morning Erle and Evelyn were standing before the breakfast-room fire.

‘I hope,’ Florence said, as she came in, ‘that you enjoyed your moonlight walk last night.’

‘Beyond everything,’ said Erle, calmly. ‘The night was perfect.’

‘But,’ said Florence, ‘you must have wanted a companion.’

‘I had one,’ said the other; ‘the best in the world—a cigar.’

‘Oh!’ said Florence, mysteriously, ‘a cigar!’ And afterwards Charles asked her what she meant; nor had he to press long for an explanation.

‘Is not that very romantic?’ she asked, as her story came to its close.

‘Very romantic indeed,’ replied Charles. And the tone of his laugh—sad, angry, revengeful—assured her that at last her work was done. The

victory so long watched and struggled for was hers.

Erle's inopportune departure had inflicted no real injury upon the play. Actors and actresses alike were perfect with their parts. Everything had been beautifully arranged. Lord Scamperly, as Dogberry, discovered a vein of low comic talent which took his best friends by surprise. Slap made a most sententious Verges, and Anstruther's disguise as the Friar was so complete, that it was not till he took his wig and beard off that Nelly was convinced of his identity. The library was turned into a green-room ; and a party of fiddlers, stowed away in an alcove, whiled away the half-hour during which a crowded audience was duly marshalled into place. At last every seat was full ; a knock was heard from behind the scenes, the band stopped in mid career, the curtain rose, and Beatrice—glowing, beautiful, and untamed, her hair swept proudly back, and her tall neck rising majestically out of a monster ruff, her mother's diamonds glittering in dazzling profusion about her, and rouge and powder adding lustre to the whole—rustled in a fine brocade across the stage.

*There* was a murmur of admiration, a hush of

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suspense, and even the severest critics admitted that her appearance, though unclassical, was effective. Already she had had a little triumph among her fellow-performers. 'I stoop to conquer,' she had said, giving a tip of her finger to Charles, whose looks assured her that her mirror had told her nothing but the truth.

'Not to conquer *me*, thank goodness,' Erle thought to himself, as turning away he looked through the curtain's peep-hole and watched Margaret and the Squire taking their place among the spectators. Meantime Florence, conscious of loveliness, and assured of her own triumph, was really good-natured about her companions' success, and cheered Nelly, already faltering and apprehensive, with kind looks and speeches.

'Frightened?' she said. 'You dear little pet, there will be plenty of Claudios, I can tell you, before the evening is over; it makes me cry to see you act; think of me and be brave.'

The first dialogue convinced everybody that two performers at least had chosen their parts sagaciously.

'What, my dear Lady Disdain,' cried Benedick, 'are you still living?'

'Is it possible,' Beatrice answers, 'that Disdain

should die while she hath such meet food to feed on as Signor Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert into disdain if you come into her presence.'

Florence tossed her head, gave her fan the most contemptuous flutter, and the audience burst out laughing at her companion's discomfiture. Erle, however, who had arrayed himself with foppish splendour in satin and velvet, and wore his sword with perfect grace, was not in the least disposed to be abashed.

'Then,' he answered gaily, 'is Courtesy a turn-coat. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted, and I would I could find it in my head I have not a hard heart, for truly I love none.'

'A dear happiness to women,' rejoined the lady; 'they would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood I am of your humour for that. I had rather hear my dog bark than hear a man swear he loves me.'

'God keep your ladyship in that mind!' said Erle, 'so some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face.'

Here *came* another burst of applause, and pre-

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sently Margaret started as her cousin appeared and acquitted himself feelingly of Claudio's amorous confession—

O my lord,  
When you went onward on this ended action,  
I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,  
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand  
Than to drive liking to the name of love.  
But now I am returned, and that war thoughts  
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms  
Come thronging soft and delicate desires  
All prompting me how fair young Hero is.

Fair indeed! When the third act arrived, and Nelly, in the simplest white and with no ornament but the colour that now died her cheeks, now left them ashy white, got tremulously through her pretty lines, the enthusiasm of the audience reached its highest point.

Sir Agricola grinned across the room at Lady Dangerfield, as, hardly conscious of its appropriateness, Hero described her friend—

O God of love! I know he doth deserve  
As much as may be yielded to a man;  
But nature never framed a woman's heart  
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.  
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,  
Misprizing what they look on, and her wit  
Values itself so highly, that to her  
All matters else seem weak. She cannot love,  
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,  
She is so self-endear'd.

‘*La plus belle des parures,*’ says the French proverb, ‘*c’est l’espoir d’être aimée.*’ Was it this that made Nelly’s eye sparkle and her cheek glow with a prettier flush than usual, and that tinged her manner with the most becoming excitement? Malagrida, at any rate, let a burst of admiration break from his lips, and being professedly a patron of youth, beauty, and innocence, declared himself completely overcome.

Pocket-handkerchiefs were in sudden request, and the Squire felt his breath coming short and hard, when the marriage scene brought affairs to a crisis, and Nelly, with her hair dishevelled, and her bridal wreath torn off, lay—fair, innocent and lifeless—across the stage. It was now that Anstruther, in a brown frieze coat, sandals, and a pilgrim’s crook, at once relieved his feelings as a man, and established his reputation as an actor. ‘I have marked,’ he cried—

A thousand blushing apparitions start  
Into her face : a thousand innocent shames  
In angel whiteness bear away those blushes ;  
And in her eye there hath appear’d a fire  
To burn the error that these princes hold  
Against her maiden truth.

‘*And all,*’ whispered Mrs. Vivien, ‘because the



poor child's maid carried on a flirtation from her window.'

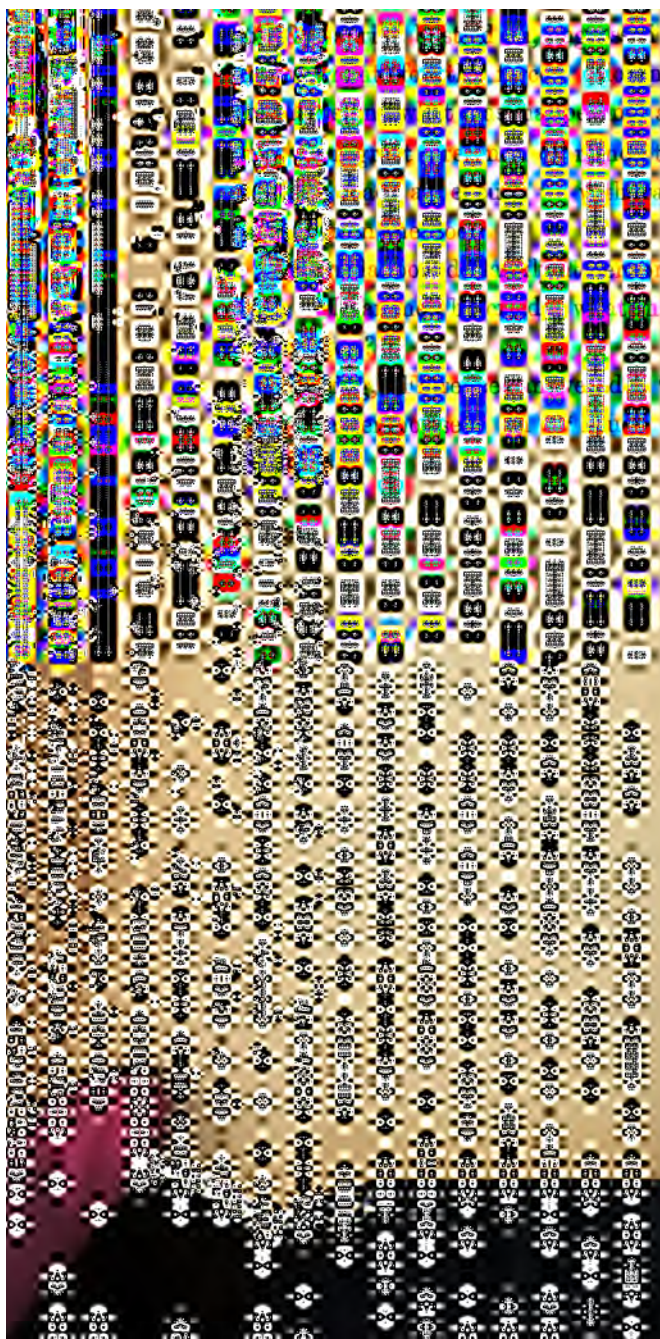
'The moral of it,' said Sir Agricola, 'should be "No followers allowed," a doctrine I insist upon with all my people.'

'At any rate,' suggested his neighbour, 'not above the area railings.' And then the curtain fell.

The scenes were being altered for the after-piece. The actors had gone away to relapse into conventional attire; and Nelly, first down of any one, found herself for a minute in the library alone. She was yet thinking over her part, when Charles came in with a courageous, half-embarrassed air, took her hand with a respectful tenderness, yet as its rightful owner, whispered something into her ear which made her eye glisten and an exclamation of surprise start to her lips and was prepared, apparently, to refute all expostulation with the oldest, pleasantest, and least answerable argument which logicians have hitherto introduced to the notice of mankind.

'I must quote Beatrice's last speech to you,' he said; "'Peace, I will stop your mouth with a——'"

At this moment the door opened: Florence



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## CHAPTER XII.

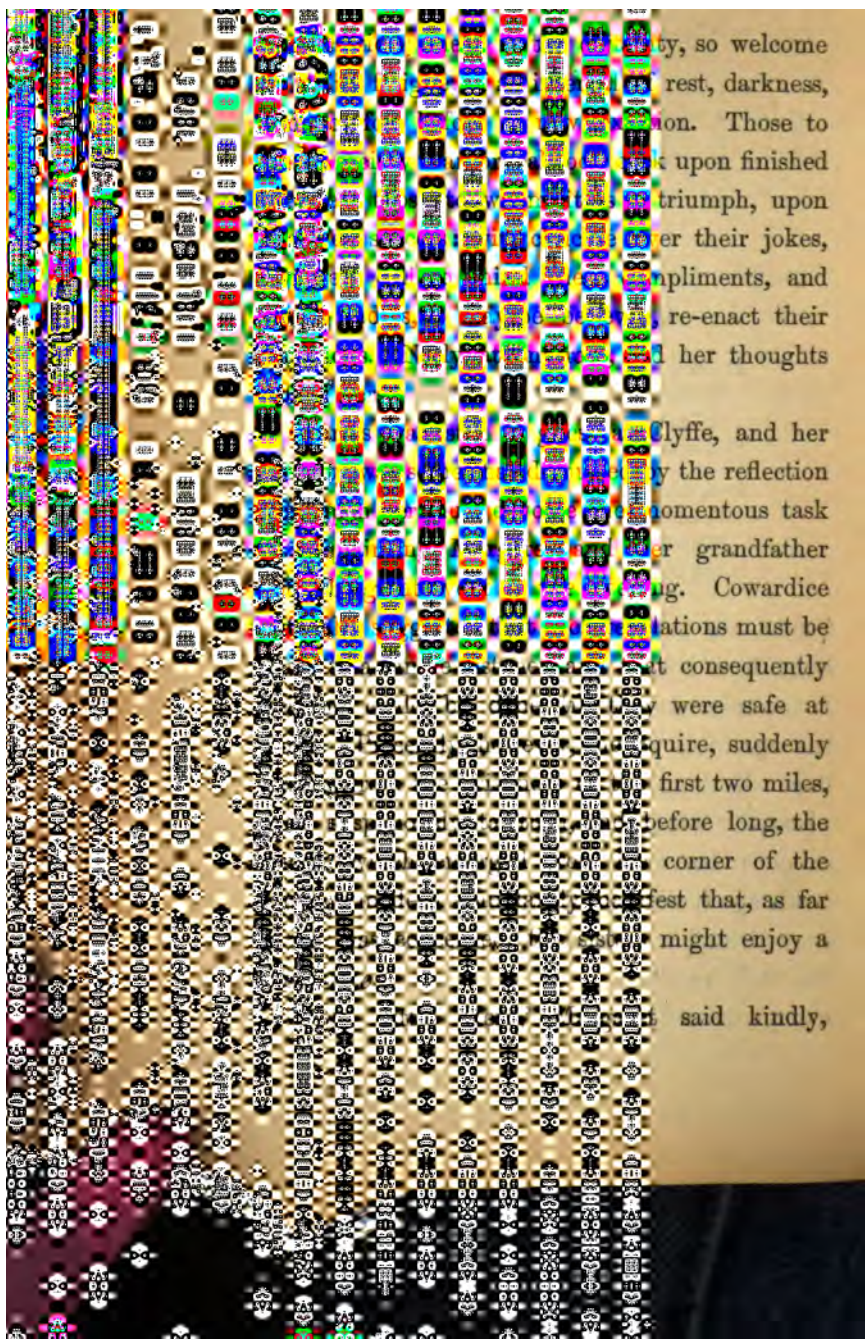
## NELLY IS CONFIDENTIAL.

/ The door was shut—I looked between  
 Its iron bars, and saw it lie,  
 My garden, mine, beneath the sky,  
 Pied with all flowers bedewed and green.

From bough to bough the song-birds crossed,  
 From flower to flower the moths and bees,  
 With all its nests and stately trees—  
 It had been mine—and it was lost. /

THERE are people who maintain that the drive home from a party is not the worst thing about it. If the entertainment has been a bad one, there is the agreeable sensation of relief, and of a duty done; if things have gone well, our spirits are pleasantly wrought up; even timid natures have caught a dash of courage: persons to whom a few hours ago it was an effort to talk have been confronted, and are formidable no longer; there is the dull soothing rumble of the wheels, good enough excuse for silence, and so provocative of





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prise, and humiliation that already reigned there.

'She told me that we were both in love,' said Nelly, simply, 'almost the first time she saw us.'

'But *are* you in love?' asked the other, crushing down the cruel impatience of the enquiry into a tone of forced composure.

For an instant her fate seemed even now in suspense; even now the doom, though half pronounced, might somehow be averted. Nelly hesitated in reply

'Am I in love?' she said, with a little childish laugh; 'well, Margaret, I can hardly tell. You know we always liked him, did we not?'

'Liked him!' cried her sister; 'and you can hardly tell! why, Nelly, does your heart tell you nothing more than that?'

'Yes,' said Nelly, thoughtfully, as if feeling her own moral pulse, and counting the beats. 'I suppose I am in love; don't you think I am?'

Margaret held back the vehement 'No,' that was rushing to her lips, and her companion prattled cheerfully on.

'If I am not I mean to be so very soon,' she said; 'he is much handsomer than Captain

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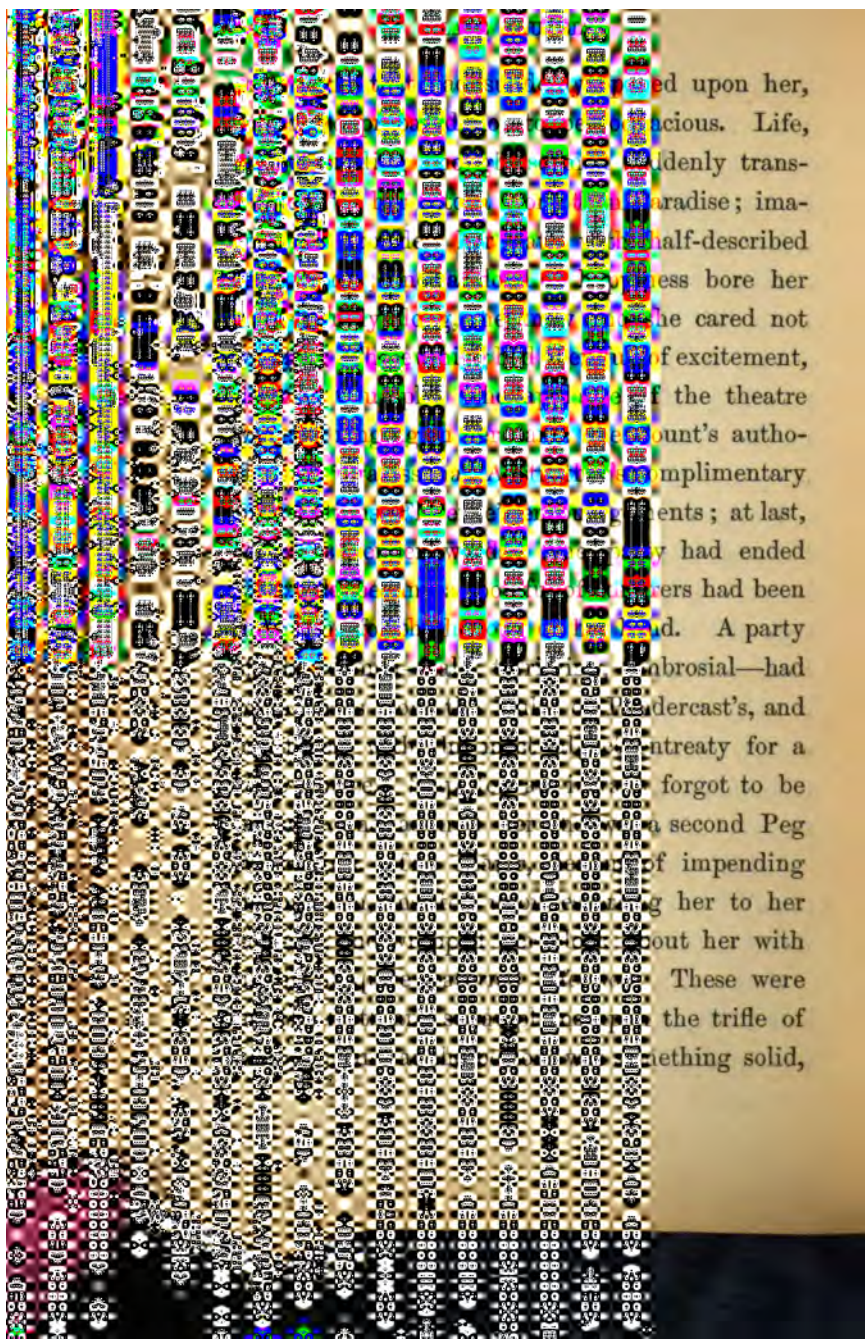
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tangible, and sweeter than all—a husband. What could people mean who said that happiness was not for man, and earth seldom the residence of any but a transient bliss?

And yet close beside her sat Margaret, with death at her heart, gradually taking in the full tragical force of the news just imparted to her. In the silence and darkness she confronted her misfortune, and hopelessly acknowledged that it was overwhelming. She seemed to herself numbed and paralysed by the blow; courage, resolution, even piety, died down within her. Grief, she began to feel, may be strained till it borders on ferocity. For the first time in her life her love to Nelly wavered, dwindled, flickered, as if for sudden extinction. It was impossible to forgive even the unconscious instrument of such a disaster; and—suggested vindictiveness—was it unconscious? Had not some little miserable coquetry, some wretched school-girl ambition, some foolish caprice of sentiment, some lesson too well learnt from her cruel instructress, led her by a pleasant path to the ruin of her sister's happiness? She was the disciple, might not she also be the colleague of Florence; and was not Florence, Margaret bitterly asked herself, a foe? It was

for this, then, that she had, ever since she could remember, given the patient thought, the watchful devotion, the passionate attachment, which from the cradle upwards Nelly had had concentrated upon herself; for this that she pressed for her return, waited for it, oh how eagerly! taken the new comer to her heart of hearts, believed and made others believe her to be perfection; and this was the end—to see her, in a negligent, half-playful mood, scarce certain of her own inclination, content, but not more than content, with her good fortune, come and lay her hand smilingly, as sole proprietress, upon what was for Margaret the one treasure of the world, the single possibility of happiness, the only escape from despair; this, then, was the end, the crowning result. It was all over; all the high hopes, the vague longing, the nervous dread of calamity, the uneasy consciousness of a neighbouring enemy. It was all over; and Margaret had lost.

They got home too soon for all. The Squire woke up with a start in the middle of his nap, as the carriage stopped at the Park gates; Nelly was recalled to earth from an agreeable course of airy castle-building; Margaret, her thoughts still in tter confusion, had to rouse herself for

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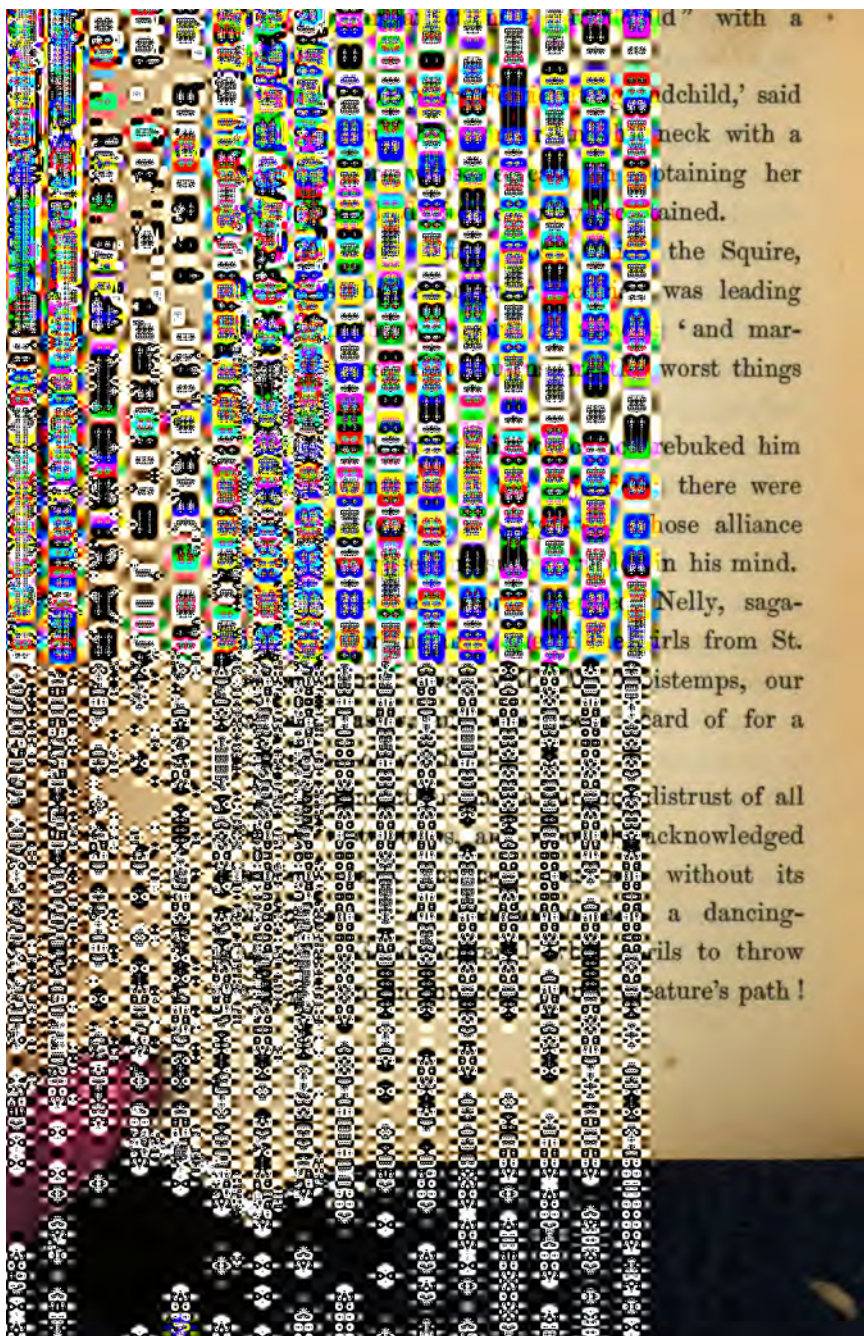
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‘I am sure,’ he said, ‘you have much too high principle for anything of the sort?’

‘I am very steady indeed,’ cried his companion, trying to look demure; ‘that is why I want to be married.’

‘But,’ persisted her grandfather, ‘are you sure you know your own minds?’

‘I am sure that I know mine,’ said the young lady, by this time convinced of the necessity of a decided tone—‘quite sure; I love him with all my heart.’

‘I see no help for it then,’ said the Squire, half abstractedly.

‘Help for it!’ cried the other indignantly; ‘one would think that it was something wicked that we wanted to do.’

Her grandfather in his heart suspected that on one side at least it was; but he made no reply.

‘Good night, little wife,’ he said; ‘and pray, whoever you marry, keep a little affection for your old grandfather.’

‘To be sure,’ cried Nelly, fondly, ‘with as many *f’s* in it as you please.’ And then she left him to his meditations.

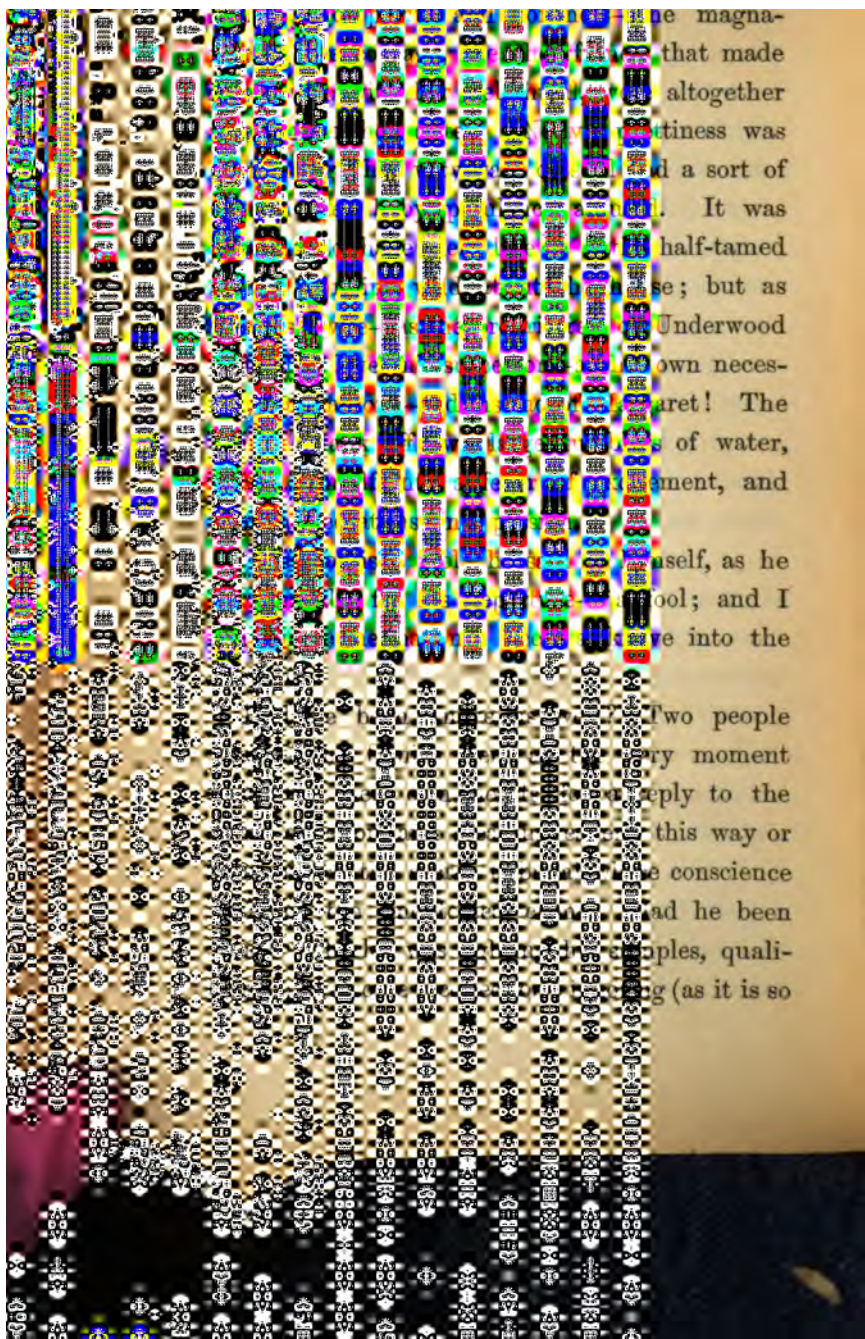
These were by no means of the pleasantest



description. An elderly man hates having his plans upset; a tender-hearted man shrinks from the idea of pain. Both of these annoyances seemed to be coming upon him. For years past he had watched the close friendship between Margaret and her cousin; and, bitterly disappointed himself, he reckoned that she could scarcely be less so. For years he had been arranging for his grandchildren, and never once had such a conjuncture as the present suggested itself to his thoughts as a possibility. In a hundred pleasant schemes Charles and Margaret formed the central group, and a new and unexpected disposition of events gave him a shock.

The more he thought of it, the more disturbed the Squire grew. He rang the bell for some cold water, poked and repoked the fire with unconscious vehemence, and walked about the drawing-room in a fever. He liked Margaret by far the better of the two, and the other plan would have secured having her always about him. Nelly was a decided trouble in her home, a pretty trouble, but still burthensome; pleasant for a variety, but intolerable in any permanent arrangement. She was excitable, moody, un-

certain in spirits. Her sister's equable good temper spread an atmosphere of serenity around her: the Squire felt that half the cheerfulness of life would be wanting in her absence. Then what would become of the village? Nelly displayed the most complete inaptitude for poor people's concerns. Even Margaret could not help laughing at her egregiously bad attempts at keeping order in the Sunday-school, when from time to time, with tears in her eyes, and a little troop of rebels behind, she appealed to have her tottering authority enforced, or some incorrigible offender summarily disposed of. Her sister, on the other hand, reigned, a gentle despot, in half the cottages in Sandysford; and every new joy, or sorrow, or anxiety soon found its way to her for sympathy, counsel, or encouragement. Her departure would, the Squire admitted, be hardly less than a catastrophe. Then as a companion there was a delicate tact about her that the other wanted; it might be childishness, but children can be refined, and Nelly was, her grandfather knew, fashioned of a coarser clay; the touch of something spiritual, that raised Margaret above the earth, and invested the common details of her life with a



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easy to do when one is judge and prisoner at once) the damning facts of the case; building up his suspicions and complaints into a compact edifice of grievance. Again and again he pronounced himself innocent; yet the acquittal gave him less satisfaction than he hoped. He proved to himself conclusively that Margaret was in the wrong—that it was she who had been guilty of desertion—that, if eyes and ears were to be believed, she had a secret understanding with Erle—that she had shown herself capable of contrivance, intrigue, perhaps even untruth—and having proved it, he knew at once that not one word of it did he really believe.

The verdict was too monstrously absurd even for the readiest faith, and the consciousness of its absurdity, banish it as he would from his thoughts, forced itself disagreeably upon him; and yet it was upon this alone that he could take his stand, and make an attempt at self-defence. What other apology—his heart smote him as he asked himself—what other apology could the most charitable ingenuity devise? He must—he would—he did believe it; and yet with how uneasy and flagging a belief! He was free to choose, and who should blame him for not choosing a woman

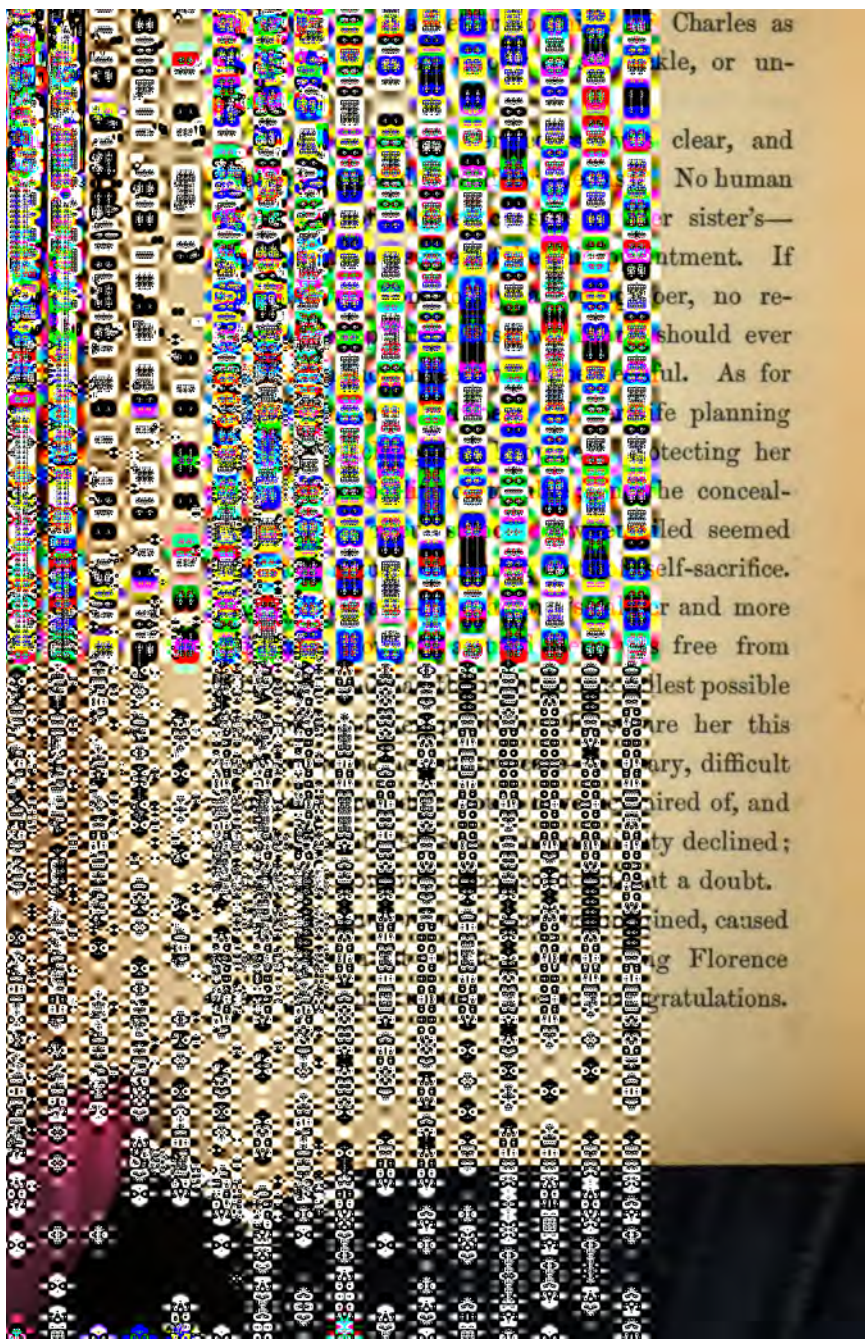
who evidently had a more than liking for another? He pictured Nelly to himself, smiling, playful, lovely—and tried to make her brightness blot out all the rest of the picture. He tried in vain; another figure stood there, reproachful, suffering, indignant with the lawful scorn and displeasure of a slighted love; Nelly's merry laugh rang in his ears—yet as he listened he seemed to catch the sound of something like a groan.

Margaret meanwhile stood before the idol where she had worshipped so long in secret; she was to do so no longer, yet she strove to believe it not a false one. She traced back the thread of their friendship through years of growing intimacy; at each new stage she found that love had been deeper, stronger, more distinct; she watched it growing through the gradations of unconscious liking, acknowledged congeniality, the tenderness of confidence, at last an absorbing passion. She recalled each variable ebb of hope or sickening fear—the words, looks, tones, upon which for weeks past her very existence had seemed to hang, and which seemed to assure her of her cousin's heart. Could she have been mistaken? Was it the rash interpretation of a too



confident eagerness? Was it the credulity of eyes blind to everything but what they long to see? Could Charles's act be interpreted in any sense but one? Could she have been rash, foolish, infatuated? What should be the verdict on him? A crowd of recollections—treasured only too sacredly, forbade an instant's hesitation—flocking to the bar of Conscience, each with its particular chain of reasoning, all coincided in a single mournful cry of—Guilty! Guilty!

But the guilt was not his alone; an instinct, undefined but perfectly clear, pointed to Florence, and said that the work was hers. Margaret was unable to detect the working of the scheme, but she felt no doubt as to the final result. Here and there she caught a clue; for a few instants the enemy was apparent—then all was obscurity again. Charles's variable moods—his unexplained change from tenderness to resentment—the sudden decisiveness, so foreign to his halting temperament, and the strange rapidity of his last resolution—all was mysterious; but every mystery has a key, and casting about for the key which should unlock her own, Margaret decided unhesitatingly that Florence's was the hand that held it. There was something of comfort in the



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There was a light in her eye of triumph, merri-  
ment, half-insolent exultation, which Margaret  
was at no loss to interpret, and which confirmed  
her suspicions. She shrank before it as from a  
cruel stab—silent, patient, self-controlled, but in  
an agony. Florence, incapable of profound or  
tender emotion, and not in the least in love  
herself, saw nothing but the natural annoyance  
at a somewhat humiliating reverse; nor when she  
thought of Erle, and the indignity of her own  
desertion, was she at all disposed to be con-  
siderate. Why, indeed, she asked herself, should  
Nelly have been disappointed any more than her  
sister? Yet there was something in Margaret's  
looks that touched her with remorse in spite of  
herself. She had plotted for this, and now that  
the plot had answered she began to think that she  
had been unscrupulous. Conquerors, it is said,  
regard their battle-fields with anything but  
satisfaction—

Such things, you know, must be  
After a famous victory.

And yet the sight of one's achievement, and the  
price it cost, has something awkward in it.  
Florence silenced her repentant mood by de-  
termining at any rate to be very kind to Nelly.

‘I expect to be asked to the wedding,’ she said caressingly, ‘as a reward for my good prophecy. You did not know how to fall in love, dear, did you, till I told you how to set about it?’

‘Indeed,’ Nelly said, tossing her head very becomingly; ‘I knew very well. It is too bad for everybody to think me a baby.’

Malagrida overheard, and burst out laughing—

‘I do not think you the least like a baby,’ he cried. ‘In return, please to let me come with Miss Vivien to the ceremony. Marriages, provided they be other people’s, are always so interesting.’

‘Miss St. Aubyn means to let us all come,’ cried Anstruther, who had been feeling extremely sentimental ever since Charles’s good fortune became known, and made no secret of his broken-hearted condition.

‘All except Mr. Erle,’ said Florence, ‘unless he is brighter than to-day. Come, Mr. Erle, have you no pretty speeches for the interesting *débutante* who did your instructions so much credit?’

Erle was in the chilliest, politest, and most transparently sarcastic mood.

‘A pretty speech?’ he cried—and Nelly fancied that she could see the sneer playing about his

lips—‘of course I have. Do you think me a monster of ingratitude, when Miss St. Aubyn has established my reputation as a manager? Lady Dangerfield has already asked me to contrive a play for her, and, I suppose, to find her two fresh Claudios for the young ladies.’

‘He is insufferable!’ exclaimed Florence. ‘Come, Nelly, into the next room, and leave him to mock by himself.’

‘Miss St. Aubyn knows me too well,’ Erle said, as they turned to go, ‘to suspect me of any thing of the kind. Charles, my dear fellow, kneel down and receive my benediction. Youth, innocence, constancy——’

‘Don’t be a fool, Erle,’ said Charles, blushing red in spite of himself, for the other’s manner was undeniably contemptuous.

‘Not be a fool?’ asked Erle, looking straight at him, with the most provoking smile. ‘And is that really your advice? Well, I will try to obey you. And when, oh most fortunate of youths, are you to be——?’

‘Executed?’ put in Malagrida—‘so young a victim, so guileless, so inexperienced—upon my soul, it is pitiable!’

Charles thought that every one was being




extremely rude. Malagrida's pleasantries were disgusting. Married men, the Count gave him to understand, were the natural enemies of the species, and lawful prey. He talked about Nelly as though she were a choice sweetmeat for which his mouth was watering, which Charles was just about to devour. He laughed at the pretty child-like simplicity of an early match—so safe, so proper, so interesting.

'*Morbleu!*' he cried, patting Charles on the back—

Morbleu! qui n'aurait de l'humeur,  
En pensant que madame  
De monsieur fera le bonheur,  
Bien qu'elle soit sa femme?  
Jours de paix, et nuits d'amour,  
Le diable y perdra son tour!

'I would back the devil's chance,' muttered Anstruther, 'if Malagrida had a hand in the matter.'

Meanwhile Charles resented the familiarity of the Italian's tone, and the implied scoff at what dignity, no less than virtue, bade him regard as above everything sacred. Nor did his intercourse with Margaret tend in any degree to console him for the discomfort which he elsewhere experienced. He hoped to reassure himself with her



that all was right, and to have his conscience set at ease. He found himself beset with graver misgivings than ever. If she was hurt, she gave no sign of pain; but she discouraged his attempts to be confidential. Something in her look and manner cut short his sentiment; affectionate speeches, long meditated, carefully introduced, died away on his lips. Was it his guilty fancy, the knowledge that he was despicable, or some subtle sympathy of insight that showed him a shade of contempt in Margaret's calm, studiously kind manner? Did he imagine it, or was it that she had thoroughly faced her position, confessed her disappointment, acknowledged the levity of his character, and with a resolute will already half dethroned him from her heart? Indecision is the offence in the code of sentiment which a woman finds it hardest to understand, and can least of all forgive.

Erle's were the only eyes for which Margaret's carefully-worn disguise was unavailing; nor would even his keen-sightedness have sufficed, but that Charles's manner supplied the missing links, and enabled him to conjecture with safety where Margaret's conduct baffled his observation. He used his knowledge with delicacy, tenderness,

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said Scamperly. 'So, Mr. Slap, that is "one" for you; and now perhaps you will leave me and my morals alone.'

'Le droit d'être Scamperly, dont les Scamperly jouissent,' cried Erle. 'Do not invade his traditional privilege of unsaintliness.'

'Pray, no more quarrelling,' cried Florence, who thought that the men were getting dangerously cross. 'Here, fortunately, is the Squire, so we must all behave properly.'

The weeks passed away; familiarity had robbed Nelly's situation of its principal terrors, and, as every new phase in turn succeeded, she poured her confidences with increasing outspokenness into her sister's ear. On one of these occasions half the mask from behind which the enemy's batteries had played upon her was suddenly swept away. Nelly had been especially affectionate, and had warmed into a somewhat tenderer train of sentiment than usual. Presently she grew embarrassed and nervous, and evidently had something on her mind.

'You will be always the same to me, dear Meg?'

'I hope so,' said Margaret, at a loss to know what was coming.





at the very point of the enquiry she longed to make.

‘You do like him, don’t you? Florence Vivien says that Mr. Erle has never been in love till now, and that we shall have both weddings together.’

‘My dear little Nell,’ said Margaret, fairly vexed out of her usual passivity of manner, ‘you, and Charley, and Miss Vivien, and every one else, are altogether dreaming. Mr. Erle is less than nothing to me, and I to him. What can have put such a wild notion into your head?’

‘Florence put it,’ replied Nelly, with simplicity; ‘and I confess I thought she was right.’

‘You never made a greater mistake in your life,’ said her sister.

‘But then,’ said Nelly, anxious to make the best of her cause, ‘you should not have told Florence about the rustication. It was hardly kind, to a person who laughs at everything. Charles was sadly vexed.’

‘I never told her,’ said Margaret.

‘No?’ asked Nelly, surprised. ‘Then there must have been some mistake.’

‘Indeed there must,’ said Margaret, firmly ‘a mistake or——’

‘Or what?’ asked her companion.

‘We will hope it was a mistake,’ said Margaret.

Then the conversation dropped, and the subject vanished from Nelly’s thoughts. Margaret knew that she had come upon another of her enemy’s snares.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## FOR BETTER FOR WORSE.

Déjà le sort a soufflé dans les voiles,  
 Déjà l'espoir prépare ses agrès,  
 Et nous promet, à l'éclat des étoiles,  
 Une mer calme et des vents doux et frais :  
 Fuyez, fuyez, oiseaux d'un noir présage,  
 Cette nacelle appartient aux amours :  
 Nous qui voyons commencer le voyage,  
 Par nos chansons égayons en le cours.

MARRIAGE—that pretty invention, as the French epigram has it, for interesting us in the future as in the present—was not likely to leave a young lady like Nelly with much leisure on her hands. With hopes, pleasures, anxieties, she was perfectly absorbed. The neighbourhood was excited at the prospect of a wedding, and Nelly found herself the centre of a flattering inquisitiveness. People treated her with a newly-found respect which was delicious. There was something in the

servants' demeanour which assured her of increased importance. A great many of her acquaintance would, she knew, have been delighted to occupy her place. The Miss Dangerfields wished her joy with an emphasis ostentatiously unselfish; but they would, either of them, she knew, have taken Charles if they had the chance, and been thankful. Their mamma muttered some gloomy criticisms on the inexpediency of cousins marrying, that were, in reality, only the measure of her vindictiveness at so provoking a disappointment. Everybody conspired to do homage to the coming queen; and Nelly, though she did her best to be modest, struggled in vain against a natural elation. The prospects of orders to give, servants and tradesmen to rule, parties over which to preside, the splendour and dignity of married life; bonnets as many and as fine as she pleased; gloves and lace handkerchiefs beyond the narrow limits of a schoolgirl's allowance; carriages and horses, and footmen, and a house, and finally, a husband of her own—always handsome, good natured, and politely tender—what prospect could be more enchanting? Ten times a day she flung herself into Margaret's arms, and declared, in an ecstasy of



satisfaction that her happiness was almost too much to bear.

Margaret, after making all allowance for the impetuosity of a first attachment, decided that her sister had not the least notion what she was about, and would have been far more profitably employed with her lesson books and exercises, which had now been discarded for a more exciting phase of life. Nelly showered kisses upon her in unmeaning profusion; some of them, Margaret felt, were really meant for Charles; some for the house, the servants, the bonnets, the gloves; some as a mere outflow for high spirits; only the tiniest residuum for the person upon whose cheek they were impressed.

Such felicity was not, however, to flow on unbroken to its close. A dark day was in store for the lovers; and the Squire, somewhat fatigued by several weeks of sentiment, showed himself ruthlessly decided in refusing its postponement. Charles, it was decided, should go back to Oxford for his degree, and was meanwhile to set diligently to work to provide against a repetition of his recent disaster. A tutor was found, the books packed up, the last adieu exchanged; and Nelly retired to her bedroom, sat at the window,

wildly waving her pocket handkerchief till the carriage was out of sight, and proceeded, despite the consolation of her maid, to cry herself almost into hysterics. An hour later she was too miserable to appear in public for lunch; but she devoured the contents of a well-supplied tray with apparent satisfaction; and as she sent down for a second help of roast mutton, the Squire was no doubt right in relieving himself of all anxiety as to the physical results of her distress, and in agreeing with Mrs. Crewe's panegyrist, that 'mental emotions increase the appetite,' and that 'sorrow is beyond all question the best specific for digestion.'

While the tiny current of domestic interest was thus flowing gently on at Underwood, the great ocean of politics was raging tempestuously at Westminster. During the recess there had been symptoms of a coming storm. Mr. Slap had been sent for by telegraph to town, and it was known that matters were not at all as they should be at the Pumps and Fountains. Public opinion, it was felt, was gathering strongly against the Metropolitan Waterworks. There was a horrible caricature in 'Punch,' in which Slap figured with a champagne bottle under his arm, astride of a

large fire-engine, and darting unwelcome cascades in all sorts of inappropriate directions. Some marble ducks that he destined for the banks of the Serpentine, were damned by the general taste almost before they had left the artist's studio. He had hoped to gratify the mob by a fountain in the Strand, and two nymphs with vases were already in preparation. A noble lord called a meeting at Exeter Hall, and denounced the scheme as pagan and indelicate. Some anonymous satirist inveighed against Slap's joviality, idleness, and indifference to everything but good dinners and fine ladies. 'Ah,' wrote the poet,

— 'If to dine all night and joke all day  
Would mend my pumps, or make my fountains play.'

At last, one fatal day, the fountains did *not* play, and everybody felt that Slap was doomed. Trafalgar-square stood silent and melancholy; the Cupid by Park-lane refused to squirt; the operations of the Benevolent Cup-of-cold-water Association were brought to a sudden stand-still; the streets were a Sahara of dustiness; nobody for six hours could wash or drink. London, in a rage of dirt and thirst, sent up a hoarse roar of indignation, and clapped its hands,

by this time extremely black, in demand of a victim. The Premier saw that if the ship was to weather the storm, it could only be by throwing somebody overboard, and gave Slap a hint to the effect that his retirement would be graceful and well-timed.

‘If I had served my God’—Slap protested ruefully that night at his club—‘with half the zeal that I have served the Whigs, I should not be in the confounded plight I am ; discarded, sir, deserted by a pack of cowards ; deserted, by Jove ! with a shameless ingratitude that makes one sick to think of.’

‘Never mind,’ cried Scamperly, with a provoking air of pity ; ‘they are a traitorous lot. I wonder who is to have the Pumps and Fountains ?’

‘Piffington,’ said somebody, looking up from that evening’s ‘Globe.’ ‘His address to his constituents is out already.’

‘Piffington !’ cried Slap, in a tone of wrath, vengeance, and humiliation, that argued ill for the tranquillity of his successor — ‘Piffington !’

‘Yes,’ said his informant. ‘He has been doing very well at the Dockyards. His reply about

pickled cucumbers, the last navy supply night, was first-rate.'

'Deuced clever fellow,' observed his neighbour.

'Clever!' cried Slap, by this time in a rage, and bursting into the most contemptuous laugh. 'I wish the Ministry joy of him. I wish the House joy, and the Pumps and Fountains; the merest drudge, sir, that ever came out of a clerk's office, or tied up a bundle of rubbish, with red tape. Ministers are waterlogged as it is: with Piffington on board, I'll back them to sink at once, and, by Jove! I hope they will.'

'Coriolanus will join the Volsci, you will see,' a bystander said, as the ex-official walked away. 'Before the Session is over Slap will be in Opposition.'

The House met, Mr. Piffington came down with a new despatch-box, and a heap of beautifully-arranged papers, and gave the most unanswerable replies to all objections. Slap, with a truculent air of defiance, and strong in the consciousness of slighted worth, took up his position below the gangway, and endured, with what stoicism he might, the slights of enemies, the apologies of his recent companions, and the sympathies of officious friends. The First Lord

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was upon him, and that sooner or later the doom would fall. In vain the Duchess of Pondercast asked him and Mrs. Slap, with the most flattering regularity, to her repasts; in vain the Colonial Secretary implored him to accept a Chief Commissionership in the Archipelago; in vain the evening papers suggested that if Mr. Slap, with all his abilities, did not mind what he was about, he would embroil himself still more completely with his employers, and damn his chance of advancement in *infinitum*. Threats, dinners, blandishments, were alike ineffectual against the *robur et æs triplex* of Slap's outraged feelings. At last he rose, and with him the spirits of the Opposition. First came some insignificant enquiries, mere feelers as to the spirit in which his grand assault would be received.

'Did his right honourable friend know,' he casually asked one night, 'why the two nymphs had not been put up in the Strand, and could anybody say where they were?'

Mr. Piffington had not the least idea, but promised to enquire. Next day he had to announce, amid the ironical cheers of the Opposition, that they had been wrapped up in brown



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clubs; and the smoking-room was deserted, and the galleries began to fill. The wretched official knew that all London was laughing at his discomfiture; not one of his colleagues would stir to his relief; the First Lord, who could have put down Slap if he had chosen, sat in silent amusement, chuckled from time to time at the best hits, and looked cheerfully at his subordinate to see how he liked it. Nobody cared in the least about the nymphs, everybody was glad of a laugh, the Opposition were delighted to see Ministers assailed; and Slap went to bed that night sated with pleasurable revenge, and with the joyful consciousness that he had made Piffington and Piffington's employers look extremely foolish.

At the next Cabinet Council Slap's dismissal was discussed, and more than one noble lord began to think that they had been mistaken. Before long the full gravity of the mistake made itself apparent. Slap had not been working at statistics, diving into blue-books, making unexplained visits into unknown localities, having appointments with the strangest and most unattractive people—in short, leading the life of a — nothing. All this had been the mere

loading of his blunderbuss; and just as the season reached its height, he brought it leisurely to the aim, and fired it off with the utmost composure in the face of Her Majesty's advisers. The Duke of Pondercast gave a groan of horror when he read one morning that Slap had given notice to move for a select committee upon the Royal Boilers. It was to be a great speech, every one knew, and long, and circumstantial, and brilliant, and telling, and everything else disagreeable that Slap could make it. Everybody who knew anything wrong about the Royal Boilers, came and poured it into Slap's ear, and received a hearty welcome. Everybody who had a grievance (and there were few people who had *not* a grievance in some way or other connected with the Royal Boilers) knew that the hour of doom had struck, and that the whole system of State-boiling was likely to receive its *coup de grâce* forthwith. Upon no subject was there deeper prejudice or more complete variety of opinion—upon no subject was the public more sensitive, or the Government full of more reasonable apprehensions. Whigs and Tories bandied it about among themselves, both parties too much afraid either to meddle with it or to leave it alone. A




succession of peace-loving ministers had spent their lives in ingenious experiments to shirk its settlement from their own shoulders to those of their successors. The Duke of Pondercast was haunted by it in his dreams. 'Après nous,' he used to exclaim, 'the Royal Boilers!' But the evil day came quicker than he thought, and his Grace was doomed to be still alive and flourishing on the night when Slap brought on his motion. There was the greatest interest in the House: the Speaker's gallery was besieged—the ladies fluttered anxiously from behind their grille—deputation after deputation from various State-boiling Departments arrived in town, and thronged the ministers' door with entreaties, promises, and encouragement. There were other deputations from desperate people, who wanted to do away with State-boiling altogether, and demonstrated with horrible distinctness that the Royal Boilers were a monstrous sham. Then there were meddlesome, suggestive people, 'the tinkerers,' as their enemies called them, who said that the Boilers would do well enough, if they were relined and copper-bottomed; and obstinate Conservatives, who maintained that the Boilers were a triumph of statesmanship,

and were working, and always would work, to perfection. Lastly, there was a nervous class, which thought that interference with the Boilers was only a first step toward the destruction of the empire; and frightened spinsters, in a paroxysm of trepidation, rallied their adherents with a no less terrifying cry than 'The British tea-kettle in danger!'

Into this troubled sea Slap calmly steered his course, and obliged his treacherous friends to follow. No wonder that the Duke had a sudden attack of gout—no wonder that all Slap's friends wrote to expostulate and to implore him even now to withdraw—no wonder that two extraordinary Cabinet Councils were convened, and that from the First Lord downwards, every servant of the Crown heartily wished Slap back at the Pumps and Fountains, or inside one of the Royal Furnaces, or in any other hot disagreeable place. Nothing could be too bad for a man who refused to leave the State Boilers to themselves.

The inferior business of the evening was disposed of, and Mr. Slap, with a formidable array of notes in his hand, arose for the fulfilment of his long-talked-of enterprise—the Achilles of the



British Senate, whose bitter wrath friends and foes alike were now to feel.

‘See,’ said an Opposition onlooker, as Slap cleared his throat, and swept his eye in triumph across the Ministerial benches—


Glittering he stands before th’ assembled host,  
Pale Troy beholds, and seems already lost.

The First Lord, at any-rate, settled himself firmly in his seat, pulled his hat over his brow, and resolved, with a smothered anathema at Slap, that it was all up with the State Boilers.

The orator first laid a tremendous substratum of fact, and every fact told with cruel effect upon the doomed institution. He gave instances of Boilers with large holes in them, and Boilers with the wrong sorts of pistons, and Boilers whose constant explosions were the terror of the neighbourhood, and Boilers that worked the wrong way, and Boilers that would not work at all, and infirm Boilers, and extravagant Boilers, and superfluous Boilers; and then he asked with the air of a man sure of his position, Did his right honourable friends, in face of such figures as these, intend to refuse him a committee? The Government certainly *did* intend, and not a man of them looked in the least convinced; but insubordinate

murmurs were heard around, and the applause at each new fact grew louder and more assured. But when Slap, gathering strength as he went, passed on to the comic part of the performance—when he dragged a host of laughable abuses to the light, each in all the nakedness of unexpected exposure, and showed that, take them from what point of view you would, the Boilers were simply a mass of absurdities—then it was that cheers became no longer perilous, and secret sympathy discarded all restraint: even the First Lord was heard to chuckle; and Mr. Multiple, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who owed the department a private grudge for the half million it had added that session to his estimates, threw aside the veil of decent reticence, and burst into an approving laugh.

Slap had been at the trouble of mastering the biographies of some of the principal Boilers from cradle to grave, and very foolish he contrived to make them look. In the first place, he said, there were several which refused, on the ground he supposed of being State engines, to use the water ordinarily supplied for such purposes, but ejected it with every symptom of contemptuous disgust. Several thousands a year, he



pointed out, were spent in providing an acceptable fluid. Kings of Persia used to have their water from the Euphrates; but, after all, water was water; and caprices like this, though excusable in an Eastern despot, were unknown in any branch of the mechanical world except the Royal Boilers. Then did the house know what repairing these precious machines cost a year? It was something beyond belief. Here was an item: eighteen thousand pounds for wash-leather—used, Mr. Slap supposed, for polishing. A Royal Boiler must of course be exceptionally bright; and he only wished they would infect Royal Boiler officials! Fifty thousand pounds for sponges and oil; one hundred tons of copper-headed nails, enough for the coffins of the whole department; rag, lint, and diachylon plaster for the people whom the engines burst against and killed—or was it for the decrepit engines?—a couple of thousand: Grease—and Mr. Slap delivered this word with all the dignified emphasis of Lord Chatham's celebrated exclamation, 'Sugar!'—Grease, sir, seventeen hundred pounds twelve and twopence! Was ever such a potent of insatiability!—oil, wash-leather, nails, rags—goodness knows how many other hundred good things



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notion of being preached at. The orator accordingly took a new direction. After all, he said, the great question was, What did they boil? With all the nails, and wash-leather, and diachylon, what was the result? Infinitesimal, Mr. Slap assured the House—a quantity small by degrees and beautifully less session by session, and hurrying by rapid gradations to its vanishing point. The Royal Boilers were unpopular. Slap himself had presented twenty-two petitions against them—and why? Because they were an outrage upon common sense. In one place actually there was nothing done, except that the little boys got their potatoes cooked at the country's expense; in another the Boiler's chimney had been very properly indicted as a nuisance; in a third was an engine which, not content with the ordinary diet of nails, oil, wash-leather, had torn off a man's arm, scalded a baby, crushed two lads to a jelly, and then, in a fit of remorse or despair, wound up its career by bursting to pieces, and blowing in all the windows within a quarter of a mile of its abode. Did the House wish this homicidal Boiler to be retained in the public employ, permitted to infringe the sixth commandment at discretion, and stimulated by official supplies

of nails, oil, and wash-leather for fresh exertions in its career of destructiveness? Then Mr. Slap passed on to the staff, which in the State Boiler Department was a notoriously healthy specimen of the finest jobbing period of our history. If there was an old woman in the three kingdoms, he, or rather she—or, to avoid unpleasantness, suppose he said *it*—was sure to be found in the precincts of the Boilers. These worthy old beings seemed mightily outraged at his figures; but the fault was not Slap's, but the multiplication table's. They reminded him of the gentleman in Pope, no doubt himself a Royal Boiler official, in tearful protestations—

Am I now threescore?

And why, ye gods, should two and two make four?


The laws of arithmetic were inflexible, and the Royal Boiler accounts were, Mr. Slap declared, little short of scandalous. And who could wonder? The chief functionaries of the department, who knew what a smell the Boilers made, how little work they did, how likely they were to burst, took good care to come near them as little as possible. The Head Inspectorship, worth 1,500*l.*, was a simple sinecure; and as the excellent gentleman who held it, had never left his bed, Mr. Slap believed,



since steam was introduced, it was just as well that it was. Then there were Deputy Inspectors, and assistant secretaries, and several offices of clerks, and boards of examiners, and checks, and counter-checks, and all the apparatus of a busy branch of the executive, and all, Mr. Slap solemnly declared, as far as he could make out, doing precisely nil. He proved that everybody connected with the office was also connected with the Head Inspector. The secretaries were sons, sons-in-law, and cousins; the porters were his retired footmen; the head clerk was a bankrupt relation—a bankrupt relation, Slap repeated solemnly—‘and though I would not breathe a word against that gentleman’s respectability, still where national nails, oil, wash-leather, &c., on this enormous scale are concerned, the confidence of the public ought to be encouraged. The clerk of the Royal Boilers, like the wife of Cæsar, ought to be above suspicion.’

Now the State Boiler Office was extremely well connected. The head clerk’s wife gave excellent balls, and this part of Slap’s speech was by no means a success. There were coughs and question, ‘ohs,’ and other unequivocal symptoms of displeasure. Directly he sat down the First Lord, who for the last half-hour had seemed asleep, sprang up, and

soon convinced the House that he had never been wider awake in his life. He began by rebutting the cruel, the scandalously unjust rumour as to the head clerk's bankruptcy. His honourable friend, he said, looking fiercely at Slap, had been entirely misinformed. The gentleman who had for years past discharged the office of head clerk with a fidelity, zeal, and perseverance which might advantageously be imitated in every branch of the service—that gentleman had never been a bankrupt, had never been in business, was the possessor of a large private income, and on every ground alike entitled to the confidence of his employers. Then the Head Inspectorship, so far from being a sinecure, required a very special combination of qualifications, and the present occupier of the post was undeniably the fittest man for it in the kingdom. For a few months he had been confined to the house; but his labours were unremitting, and his instructions—if the honourable member had taken the trouble to read them—perfect models of administrative sagacity. The honourable member, he said, had come to a great question in a spirit of promiscuous mischief-making, like the Irishman who went into Donnybrook fair with his shillelagh, trusting in God that he should hit the right man:





the honourable member was resolved to hit some one, and apparently did not care much whom ; but he should not, in common prudence, have hit himself. And then the Minister good-naturedly pointed out that the accounts of which Slap complained had been transferred to the Royal Boiler Office from the Pumps and Fountains, and had in reality been drawn up under what ought to have been his own supervision. Next, as to the work done, there was really an extraordinary misapprehension. The amount of public boiling was enormous. The figures did not appear in the columns on which the honourable mover's calculations were based, because, for convenience-sake, they were entered under another heading ; but that the Boilers worked well—that they worked economically—that State-boiling in general was a great national blessing—that to grant a committee at that period of the session would be only to rekindle a hundred expiring animosities—that if the State Boilers went, a great deal more would soon follow in their train—that honourable gentlemen opposite had better mind what they were about, before they committed themselves to a revolutionary project—all these, and a great many other wholesome political doctrines, the Minister enunciated, and

the House of Commons received, and Slap felt a horrible consciousness that he was a ruined man.

Then the leader of the Opposition got up, and implied that, though Slap had made out his case so far as the irregularities of the Government were concerned, and though the Head Inspector, like other recent appointments, was all that his worst enemies could paint him, and though the reforms instituted by his colleagues when in office had been wantonly, negligently, criminally set aside, yet that such was Conservative chivalry—such the awe felt on that side of the House for the sacred fabric of the Constitution—such his desire to meet his honourable friends opposite in a spirit of frankness, loyalty, and consideration, that he intended to take a neutral course, and that though he could not vote against the motion, he strongly urged Slap to withdraw it. This heroic forbearance, however, did not preclude him from being extremely sarcastic at the expense both of his present antagonist and his destined ally. He drew a graphic picture of Slap as the conquered Bull in the ‘Georgics,’ driven by the victorious Piffington from the hereditary stalls, nursing his anger, and preparing in solitary meditation the vengeance due to his rejected love—



*Victus ab it longeque ignotis exulat oris,  
 Multa gremens ignominiam, plagasque superbi  
 Victoria, tum quos amisit inultus amores.*

He congratulated him on the sudden sharp-sightedness of non-official life, the mere first-fruits of that enlarged political vision which would, he assured Slap, be the inevitable result of a transferred allegiance. Then he gave an account of the mingled alarm and amusement produced in his own rural neighbourhood by the recent erection of a State Boiler, and compared it to the Trojan horse being dragged into the city—'*scandit fatalis machina muros, Foeta armis, pueri circum innuptæque puellæ*'—all the little ragamuffins of the country in a frenzy of excitement, peering into the mysterious contrivance; all the old women frightened into fits by its whistle; the parson of the parish protesting against State-boiling upon Sundays; the Squire in horror at an influx of Radical stokers; the farm-boys seduced from bird-scaring, and labourers' wages going up twopence a week. On the whole, however, the Opposition was unfavourable to the enquiry; and Mr. Slap, consoling himself with a solemn protest that he would bring it on early next session, consented to let his motion drop. In the following week

'Punch' had a big picture with Slap and his confederates as the witches in 'Macbeth,' and a State Boiler in due process of magical fermentation :—

*1st Witch.*

Round about the cauldron go,  
In the nice statistics throw.

*2nd Witch.*

Facts that Slap's inventive brain  
Conjures from the vasty main;  
Figures, ranged with neatest skill;  
Puns enough to make you ill.

*3rd Witch.*

Air of candour artificial,  
Liver of an ex-official;  
Tooth of malice, envy's eye,  
Half a frightened Ministry.

*1st Witch.*

Lips inured to loyal phrase,  
Fingers itching for a place.

*2nd Witch.*

Innuendoes, gossip, sneers,  
Lively Opposition cheers.

*3rd Witch.*

Hints of scandal understood—  
Now the charm is firm and good.

*All.*


Double, double, vain the trouble  
Of the great State Boiler bubble!

With a copy of this 'Punch' in his pocket,  
Mr. Slap, who liked a joke, even at his own

expense better than none, and was rather flattered than otherwise by the caricature of himself, took his place for Sandyford next day, resolved upon enjoying a well-earned holiday at Clyffe, and accepting the general invitation—for which as a sharer in the Christmas theatricals he had come in—to be present at the ceremonial of Charles's wedding. He and Malagrida went down together, and were in the middle of a hot political discussion when the train drew up at Sandyford, and they found the Clyffe break awaiting their arrival. Both gentlemen piqued themselves on their taste, and came provided with handsome offerings for the bride. Malagrida especially had sent to Rome for an antique necklace, the quaint massive costliness of which would have done credit to a royal collection. Nelly's heart throbbed as she opened the casket; she fled with the treasure to her bedroom, and Margaret found her, rapt in delight, before a mirror. Half flushed with satisfaction, half blushing to be detected, she started in confusion as her sister's voice recalled her to herself. To Margaret it seemed as though the picture of childish loveliness could hardly be surpassed: the eye beaming with satisfaction; the glowing cheek; the pretty gesture of surprise; the natural guile-

less vanity; the playfulness of a half-frightened, gentle, tender creature, compounded of sunshine, and smiles, and laughter—exempt from the common burthen of her kind—a stranger to serious emotion, or the possibility of a gloomy mood. What wonder that wherever she went people began to pet her? How natural that Charles in this sunshiny presence should forget a less spirit-stirring sentiment—a less light-hearted companion—the scarcely-hinted vows of a soberer passion, and yield himself to the infection of merriment with a joyful recklessness: how natural—and, added a sterner voice, to which Margaret, even in her secret thoughts, did not choose to give a hearing—how base!

Charles meanwhile was in full enjoyment of a smooth and unlaborious courtship. Conscience, which a hundred times had shouted 'Traitor!' in his ear, whispered now but in intermittent and enfeebled tones. The idea of desertion, at first terribly oppressive, had been gradually banished from his thoughts, and seemed day by day more entirely incredible. Margaret's demeanour—frank, business-like, active—suggested no suspicion of distress. She was busy about her sister's plans, held cabinet councils with dressmakers and





confectioners, discussed with her grandfather the list of relations to be invited, the procession to church, and the details of the wedding breakfast; and went with the utmost contentment to town for long days of shopping, which Nelly's exacting taste and numberless caprices would have made a martyrdom to all but the most forbearing companion. Nobody could possibly look less love-lorn or sentimental; and Charles, reassured by her appearance, banished the last lingering misgiving, and threw himself without compunction into the privileged enjoyments of a man who was at once young, rich, prosperous, a welcome lover and an acknowledged heir. He lifted the cup to his lips—sweet, sparkling, rose-crowned—drank, and drank again, and set it down at last, startled to find himself less pleasure-intoxicated than he had hoped. The society of his future wife cost him no effort, and it yielded him enjoyment, but not so intense, so poignant, so soul-stirring a sensation as lovers are traditionally supposed to feel, and as Charles's boy-dreams had pictured for himself. Was it then an overdrawn style, a mere poetical exaggeration, the conventional extravagance of novelists and poets, that shaped those high-flown phrases of passion stronger than death

itself, of devotion for which the common round of life scarcely gave scope enough—of souls so firmly linked, so interpenetrated with mutual love, so nicely adjusted in every fibre of their being, that henceforth to divide was to annihilate, and two existences seemed, in more than a metaphorical sense, to be merged in one? He read over his old favourite love-songs, and found them insupportably hyperbolic—

*À ses moindres discours suspendre tout son être,  
Ému d'un doux espoir,  
Et mourir tout le jour, hélas, à se promettre  
Un sourire le soir—*

Prettily sentimental, Charles thought to himself, but morbid surely; well enough from a theatrical Frenchman to his mistress; but simply foolish in the mouth of a sober English husband. Nelly's smiles were to be had morning, noon, and night, and had not, thank goodness, to be paid for in sighs. As for hanging on her lips in fond expectancy to catch the precious accents as they fell, Charles burst out laughing at the idea. They were dear little lips, cherry bright, and made for kissing; but they talked the most dreadful rubbish, pouted whenever their proprietress had not exactly what she wished, and were quite undeserving of any rapturous enthusiasm. One

evening the pretty lips were employed in singing; and an air, at which for several mornings she had been hard at work, for the first time produced. Nelly sang it cheerfully through, bending every faculty, it seemed, to avoid an ever-impending break-down.

Ask me no more; thy fate and mine are sealed;  
I strove against the stream, and all in vain:  
Let the great river take me to the main;  
No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield—  
Ask me no more.

‘There!’ Nelly said, jumping up with glee from her accomplished task, ‘ask me no more! And why do you smile, Margaret? Was it not all right?’

‘All quite right,’ her sister said, laughing; ‘but what made you choose such a sentimental song as that?’

‘Oh,’ Nelly said, gravely, ‘I like the sentimental ones, because of the slow time; the fast accompaniments distract me.’

Thereupon Charles burst out laughing too, and somehow Nelly felt that her new song had not been as successful as it deserved. And then the young lovers went away into the library for a *tête-à-tête*, and Charles made Nelly go and fetch a new bonnet, with pink roses, which had arrived

that day, which Nelly was very glad to do; and they discussed the precise tinge of the pink, and the position of the roses, and Charles grew so impertinent that Nelly crumpled up the silver paper from the bonnet-box into a large ball, and threw it at him; and then, peace having been proclaimed, and solemnised with a kiss, they passed on to furniture, and the rent of a house in Chester Square, and how much a good cook ought to have for wages, and whether they would go to a great many balls their first summer in London, and so came back at last into the drawing-room thoroughly satisfied with existence and themselves—Charles with the conviction that an hour's love-making was no bad expedient for whiling away an idle evening; and Nelly, with the pink bonnet still fluttering before her mind's eye, to be haunted by visions of a matrimonial Elysium, in which the deliciousness of a *trousseau* was the uppermost idea, and her future lord and master held only a subordinate place, or sometimes even, could Nelly but have known it, scarcely found a place at all.

To Margaret, as the time for parting drew on, the prospect seemed to darken day by day. The crisis of her misfortune was at hand. She had

thought of it so often, dwelt upon it, prepared herself for the effort, fancied that she had gauged its terrors, and yet it was terrible. How would life look without her old companions? How would the Manor-house seem when the bustle was over, and the lovers gone, and the quiet routine of weeks and months, each just like the last, begun again, and she and her grandfather once more left alone? Blank, cold, wearisome. Her heart died down within her at the sense of tedium which she fancied creeping slowly but irresistibly upon her hour by hour, blotting out an enjoyment, dulling a faculty, robbing existence of a charm. Reason depicted her cousin's character—weak, shallow, variable; but sentiment is eminently unreasonable. Each day's fresh experience gave her new insight into an unsuspected levity, an infirm will, the selfishness of a feeble nature; he was just the man, she resolved, from whom any one, who depended on him for stedfastness, would reap certain disappointment; he would certainly have made her wretched; he would be certain to behave ill—he *had* behaved ill; and yet she loved him.

At the thought of separation, the old feelings overrode the new—the pleasant old days before

love was conscious of itself, or any feeling recognised but simple enjoyment and affection. It is easy to analyse our friends, write them down wanting, condemn them in our heart's tribunal, and register their disloyalty; but when they come to leave us; when the time for reconciliation is over; when, quarrelling or loving, we are to see them no more—does not Reason give her verdict with a faltering voice, and Remorse banish every thought except that they *are* our friends, and that, be their faithlessness what it may, it is agony to part? Margaret found herself struggling with all her might against unhappiness, but her forces were giving way inch by inch, and already wavering for disastrous defeat. She could think of her cousin now only as the tender friend, the pleasant companion of other days, the sharer of common recollections, interests, and pleasures; and already it was half a crime to think of him as anything but as another's husband. Which would be worse, she wondered, the present sharp poignant pang, with the necessity for immediate action, or the dull aching void which must presently succeed—the burthen of a whole disappointed lifetime?

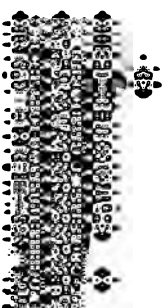
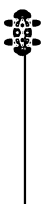
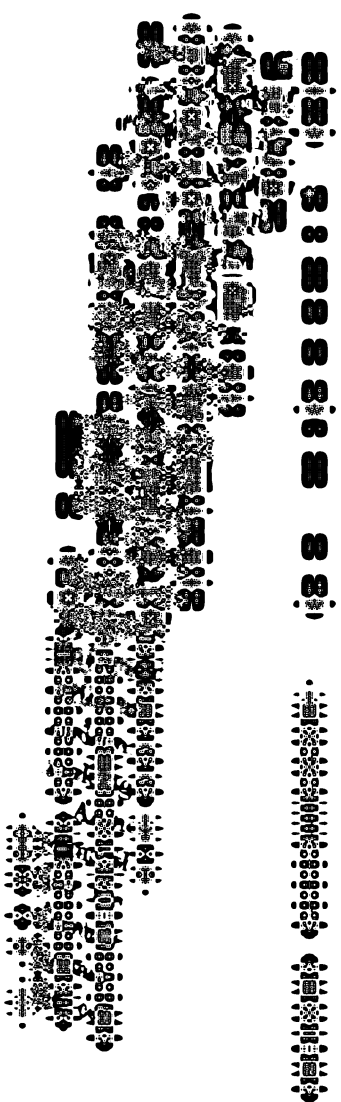
At length the eventful morning arrived, and Nelly—the agonising anxieties of her toilet safely



undergone—in a bewilderment of nervousness, excitement, and delight; smiles, and blushes, and tears following each other in picturesque alternation, like passing clouds across her face—was carried off to church, a pretty victim, white-crowned, glittering, lace-enshrouded from the too curious gaze, and there offered up on the shrine of that matrimonial Moloch to whom year by year so many tender damsels fall a prey. Nothing, Malagrida declared, could be more perfect than her dress, her demeanour, or the pretty tremulous accents in which she made the responses which raised her to the dignity of wife. When they got home, he greeted her with a chivalrous respectful tenderness that Nelly thought extremely flattering, but which, had she known it, contrasted strangely enough with the contemptuous terms in which he and Slap had been all the morning denouncing woman as a sex, and matrimony as an institution.

‘Trop ou trop peu,’ he said, ‘should be the motto of the whole affair — passion, satiety, hatred; show me the man who has travelled the road, and has not stopped at one stage or the other.’

‘Why omit the golden mean?’ objected Slap,



occurred to her, almost for the first time, how sad it was to be leaving her home, her grandfather, the sister on whom, ever since she could remember, she had relied for sympathy and support. She was vexed, too, at her travelling-dress, which arrived at the very last moment, and was trimmed exactly in the way she most disliked.

‘Did it not,’ she asked Margaret, anxiously, ‘make her look a perfect fright? How provoking it was that people would be always so unpunctual!’

‘Come, come, little fright,’ Margaret said, laughing, ‘you ought to be off in twenty minutes. Charley will think it pretty enough, you may be sure.’

Thereupon ensued a general hurry and confusion which reduced Nelly’s already fluttering wits to simple chaos: a sudden fit of distress at departure, anxiety about her boxes, admonitions to her maid, leave-takings of her sister, a grave benediction from the Squire—kisses, and tears, and solemn words that seemed to fall faintly on her ear; and then all her outward passage thronged with kindly forms, dimly seen through her tears, the familiar faces dear from childhood upwards, pleasant friends and faithful servants, and the old nurse, delighted with her darling’s prosperity—

all eyes bent upon her with tenderness, interest, and hearty good wishes, and loving hands stretched eagerly to grasp her own; and then—a crowd of hurrahing boys and men—a whirr of wheels—a crash of church-bells, and once more the last unheard ‘Good-bye!’ and then all was over, and she was alone with her husband; and Charles, as the carriage turned, looked back on his home, and saw Margaret standing at the door, looking after them with wistful, solemn, melancholy eyes, which not all the excitement of the occasion enabled him to forget, and which cast a little shade of dissatisfaction over the first journey of his honeymoon.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

LONDON

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NEW-STREET SQUARE



# LATE LAURELS.

BY THE

AUTHOR OF 'WHEAT AND TARES.'

[ Sir Henry S. Cunningham. ]

' Satis magnum alter alteri theatrum sumus. '

' Chaqu'un tourne en réalité,  
Autant qu'il peut, ses propres songes ;  
L'homme est de glace aux vérités,  
Il est de feu pour les mensonges. '

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON :

LONGMAN, GREEN, LONGMAN, ROBERTS, & GREEN.

1864. X

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CONTENTS  
OF  
THE SECOND VOLUME.

---

CHAPTER I.	
THE BEGINNING OF TROUBLES . . . . .	PAGE 1
CHAPTER II.	
LADY DANGERFIELD IN ARMS . . . . .	11
CHAPTER III.	
SOUTHWARDS . . . . .	37
CHAPTER IV.	
BEAUTY'S PERILS . . . . .	53
CHAPTER V.	
A FRIEND'S QUARREL . . . . .	65
CHAPTER VI.	
AN UNEXPECTED RETURN . . . . .	87
CHAPTER VII.	
RETRIBUTION . . . . .	107
CHAPTER VIII.	
ERLE'S WOOING . . . . .	135

## CHAPTER IX.

	PAGE
FAREWELL . . . . .	156

## CHAPTER X.

FANCY FREE . . . . .	172
----------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XI.

THE SHARINGHAM HOUSE-WARMING . . . . .	196
--	-----

## CHAPTER XII.

NELLY IN TROUBLE . . . . .	203
----------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XIII.

FLORENCE AND MARGARET . . . . .	243
---------------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XIV.

FIRE! . . . . .	266
-----------------	-----

## CHAPTER XV.

ANSTRUTHER GOES INTO ACTION . . . . .	289
---------------------------------------	-----

# LATE LAURELS.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE BEGINNING OF TROUBLES.

Au mois de mai j'ai vu Rosette  
Et mon cœur a subi ses lois ;  
Que de caprices la coquette  
M'a fait essayer en six mois !

THE strangers amongst whom, a month later, the young couple paused from day to day on their southward journey, thought them, no doubt, a pretty picture of conjugal devotion. Nelly's travelling attire by no means merited the disparagement she had heaped upon it; and go where they would, Charles felt agreeably conscious that admiring eyes attested the wisdom of his choice. More than once, in a crowd of Frenchmen, he caught a smothered exclamation of delight, the sincerest of all possible compliments to his wife's good looks. His pride in her


rose in proportion to the general enthusiasm; and the homage which society accorded, roused him to still higher flights of devotion than any yet attempted. It was pleasant to be the husband of a beauty; and Nelly herself enjoyed the dignities of her new position with comical satisfaction. Bride and bridegroom played their appropriate parts with the zeal of ascertained congeniality. Nelly was prettily tyrannical, and found despotism very much to her taste. Charles's chivalrous assiduity astonished even himself; and for six weeks, at least, he loved the silken fetters—so soft, so light, so pleasantly suggestive of the easy slavery, for which he had abandoned the uninteresting freedom of bachelorhood—silken fetters, and yet one day he came to feel that they held him firm as adamant; he struggled, yielded, struggled again, found himself faster bound than ever, gave up the effort, and despairingly acknowledged himself a slave. What is all very nice in courtship becomes wearying in matrimony; and a woman's caprices no sooner cease to be picturesque than they become oppressive. Nelly's claims, however, did not diminish with the abatement of her husband's zeal, and Charles, before long, began to feel himself oppressed.

Her interesting petulance received a harsher name. She could be selfish, stubborn, even passionate: she carried her own way with unfeminine determination, and resented any hindrance as a personal affront. The little mishaps of travel betrayed her into indecorous excitement. One day, Charles overheard her scolding her maid, and was half startled, half amused, on the whole a little shocked, at the vehemence of her tones: *tantæne animis cælestibus iræ?* he thought, 'Poor Jeannette's turn to-day and mine to-morrow,' and so was more than ever on his guard against the possibility of mishap. Nelly, meanwhile, began to love tyranny for tyranny's sake, and was sometimes capricious, her husband thought, for the simple enjoyment of ascendancy: the reflection was irritating, and matters tended towards a storm. Once, at the end of a long tiresome day's journey, which had reduced the nerves of both to an unusual sensitiveness, there came a little outbreak—an angry exclamation, a snappish reply, an unkind gesture, a stormy brow, a flood of ready tears; and, though there was a speedy reconciliation, the effect remained. The quarrels of lovers—so runs the proverb—are the renewal of affection; say, rather, the heralds



of its disappearance. Charles grew silently disturbed and alarmed; his heart misgave him; a thought, a recollection, a keen, torturing pang of unavailing regret, which he would not acknowledge, but which shot for an instant through his mind—a contrast which it was almost a crime to draw—the voice of conscience drowned for a while in the din of excitement, but still there if he chose to listen—all weighed upon his spirits. Nor was Nelly in the least degree capable of dispelling his melancholy mood: her perfect unconsciousness that anything was wrong, helped only to provoke him: her serene contentment and placidity, when his own mind was in perturbation, seemed but another proof of the absence of any real harmony between their natures. The pleasure of her society was a languid one, and monotony soon robbed it of its earlier charm. What—they had often asked themselves, jesting at their own practical communications—did lovers find to talk about when household matters were disposed of? It was well enough to joke about it beforehand, but the problem now recurred with painful reality. Charles found himself more than once racking his brains for a remark, and horribly envious of the volubility of

the young couples who often crossed his path. It had been disagreeable enough he remembered, at college, to sit in the Oxford Schools, with a fair expanse of unstained paper lying reproachfully before him, as if petitioning for the answers which he could not give, while all around him his better-read compeers were scribbling as if for their lives, haunted apparently by the impossibility of compressing all they knew into a single sitting: but to see other men chattering by the hour together to their wives, and to be conscious of having nothing in particular to say to one's own—to hear laughs, and whispers, and the carelessly concealed outbursts of private fun, and little mock bickerings, the mere excuse for a tenderer mood—to catch a glimpse in fact of the seventh heaven of conjugal felicity, and to know that one is standing upon the cold, dry, prosaic earth—to feel dull and spiritless, and only not morose—all this was enough to perturb a more stoical nature than Charles's, and to give reviving conscience every possible chance of wielding her lash to good effect. The incidents of the journey brought out the deficiencies of Nelly's character with a distinctness which nothing short of amorous fatuity could refuse to recognise. She liked the pretty



scenes through which they passed, and went into conventional raptures whenever they reached a certain altitude above the sea; but her ecstasies, Charles found, were extremely transient, and meant about as great a compliment to Nature as the '*très contente*' which she inscribed after her name in the hotel books did to the proprietors of those establishments. She read the most distractingly-stupid novel all through passes where every turn of the road brought a fresh dream of loveliness to sight, by the banks of mountain-locked lakes, by villages clustering nest-like on the valley's side, over fields where famous armies fought, by towers where sages watched, or the squares in which martyrs perished; all seemed alike to her, and all insufficient to wean her attention from the vulgar vicissitudes of a fictitious courtship.

'Shall I teach you some Latin, Nelly?' Charles said, with a sneer; 'say the words after me; *caelum—non—animum—mutant*—that is, "I buy a stupid Tauchnitz to keep my thoughts at home."'


'It is so very interesting,' Nelly answered, abstractedly, without looking up from the book, 'I advise you to read it.'

‘Thank you,’ said her husband, ‘I will take it on trust; meanwhile there is Monte Rosa all ablaze with the loveliest pink; look, look, before it fades!’

‘Where?’ Nelly exclaimed, shutting up the ‘Twin Sisters’ with a sigh at such unwelcome interruption: ‘yes; and what makes it so pink, pray?’

‘The blood of Alpine tourists,’ said Charles, by this time quite provoked, ‘who have perished on the heights, each one waving a flag and shouting “Excelsior,” like the boy in the song.’

And then, as bad luck would have it, Nelly began to extemporise a performance of that popular ballad. Pleased with the sound of her voice, and unconscious of any shortcoming, she looked straight into Charles’s face to judge of its effect on him: she looked, and as she reached the last perilous ‘Excelsior’—a musical altitude as fatal to careless performers as the iciest of Alpine passes to an untrained pedestrian—she read in his eyes a more emphatic condemnation than if a whole agony-stricken theatre had hissed her from the stage. Charles turned his eyes away, pretended to be looking for a book, and began to whistle—beyond a doubt, completely discomposed.



‘What,’ Nelly asked, impatiently, ‘you do not like it?’

‘On the contrary,’ said Charles, stopping short in his whistling; ‘only—’

‘Only?’ pressed his inquisitor, cutting off all escape.

‘Well,’ he said, apologetically, ‘that last “Excelsior” was a *little*, only just a little flat; and I dare say the young man with the flag sang it flat himself, as he had had such a hard walk up the hill; so I ought not to have objected, ought I?’

But Nelly was by no means pleased with the explanation, and secretly thought her husband very rude. Her schoolfellows at St. Germaines used, indeed, to joke at her inaccurate ear, and had laughingly forbidden her to distress their nerves by hazardous attempts at song; Margaret, too, never encouraged her ambition as a vocalist, and was provokingly resolute in advising her to stick to polkas; her last performance at the Manor had been completely misappreciated; but Nelly was sceptical at heart as to the unfavourable verdict tacitly pronounced upon her skill. The notes came clear and ringing—they were the right notes, for she read them in her book; and it was difficult to see why her audience should

not be as pleased as herself. There was something extremely irritating in a disapproval which all appeared to share, something humiliating in the explicit avowal of dislike into which her lover had just been driven. Was he her lover? the cruel thought flashed suddenly into her mind; would a real lover be so keen to discover a little, little fault, so ready to confess his discovery?

‘I cannot please you, Charley,’ she said, ‘not when I read, not when I look at the view, not when I sing; do you really love me?’

The tears stood trembling in the pretty blue eyes—picturesque, anxious, reproachful; a little tender hand crept to nestle, bird-like, in his own; the consciousness of a rude speech filled him with sudden repentance; and Charles, with many kisses, and vehement protestations of unflagging zeal, confessed himself a monster of unkindness, and his bride—mind, body, soul, and voice—the delight of his existence and the paragon of her sex.

And yet, when they afterwards relapsed into silence, and Nelly went contentedly back to the ‘Twin Sisters,’ that last ‘Excelsior’ rang horribly in his ears; and Charles, gloomily mindful of



delicious hours spent by Margaret's pianoforte, let his thoughts wander in a melancholy track, and resolved that there was one pleasure, at any rate, which henceforth he must be prepared to taste alone.

## CHAPTER II.


## LADY DANGERFIELD IN ARMS.

Then tell us all about the war,  
And what they fought each other for.

MEANWHILE a war of the very fiercest order was convulsing the whole county of Heavyshire from one end to another. Mr. Slap's unlucky motion was one cause of the tumult, and Lady Dangerfield's state of mind was another. At this point, accordingly, it becomes necessary to summon that imposing matron from the comparative retirement in which the fortunes of the story have hitherto allowed her to remain. As she is about to descend into the arena, and meet no less an antagonist than Mr. Slap in mortal combat, it is only proper that before the fight begins some delineation should be attempted of a personage round whom so profound an interest is presently to centre. While Bellona is fitting on her harness and

preparing for the fray, the humble herald of the encounter may proclaim her style, and amidst an appropriate flourish of trumpets reveal to the admiring beholder the full prestige of traditional prowess and oft-achieved victory.

Lady Dangerfield, then, was the terror of the neighbourhood, and was regarded by the less sombre majority of her acquaintances in the light of a sort of heavenly scourge. Her face wore a look of inquisitorial importance, as if, by divine commission, for ever peering into the peccadilloes of the human race, and was on the whole suggestive of that curious optical delusion, which, ever since the days of the Pharisees, has combined a minute observation of motes in other people's eyes with the most complete unconsciousness of the beams which grace one's own. If tracts, hymn-books, and sacred scandal could make a saint, Lady Dangerfield ought to have been canonised upon the spot. Sir Agricola with a groan recalled the Caudle lectures which his sins had cost him; the Rector acknowledged her polemical superiority, and a long succession of curates had trembled in their shoes when some unlucky phrase suggested a suspicion of unorthodoxy, and drew upon its perpetrator a






look fatigued; the poor men in the free seats in the aisle moved uneasily as she passed them in review; the very children in the organ-loft felt that even there they were not safe, and that if the temptation of surreptitious lollipops beguiled them into a forbidden meal, almost before the sin was committed, the grimmest of recording angels, in the shape of 'my lady,' would have taken a note of the circumstance, and mentally marked down the culprit for future retribution. When other folks knelt down to say their prayers and joined in the common voice of humility and devotion, Lady Dangerfield preferred to worship erect, and chose an attitude that enabled her literally to watch and pray—pray, that is, against her neighbours' faults, and watch for the casual irregularity to which tedium, naughtiness, or a favourable moment might seduce some juvenile devotee.

But it was in the cottages of Sir Agricola's labourers that Lady Dangerfield was regarded with the greatest awe, and gave the fullest vent to her dictatorial mood. She atoned for scanty alms by profuse exhortations, and an inquisitiveness which seemed absolutely insatiable. The doctrine which pronounces every Englishman's house to be his castle gained no admission to Lady Dan-

gerfield's social code; no such unhealthy independence revealed itself within two miles of Sir Agricola's domains. The women screwed their faces to a smile, dusted the solitary chair, extorted reluctant courtesys from their progeny, and did their utmost in a dismal fashion to welcome their illustrious guest. It may be doubted, however, whether upon the whole it is cheering to have one's proceedings overhauled, a husband's shortcomings criticised, an increasing family denounced; to be upbraided with the untidiness of one's cottage, the negligence of one's own attire, the scholastic irregularities of one's truant babes, and to have all the less genial doctrines of the faith brought to bear, like some raking theological battery, with merciless effect upon everybody and everything which one holds dearest in the world. Lady Dangerfield's philanthrōpy was useful but severe, and her mode of 'doing good' was, we may surmise, something extremely different from His from whom sympathy was readier than reproof, and of whom, as of the greatest of benefactors, it is recorded that 'the common people heard Him gladly.'

Thus accustomed to the pleasures of empire, and equipped with various explicit theories as to





the reciprocal obligations of herself, her children, and society at large, Lady Dangerfield, it may readily be imagined, attached no mean importance to the completion of her designs, and submitted with but a very partial resignation to such disappointments as on one occasion or another happened to cross her path. It was under one of the severest of these that she was just now suffering. The visit to Clyffe, looked forward to as a victorious campaign, had proved one long reverse; and Lady Dangerfield, judicious parent as she was, had returned home in a moral condition, which, for lack of a more precise psychological term, may be vaguely described as 'morbid.' Her conscience was uneasy; she did not exactly think the theatricals wrong, but she thought them a great deal nearer wrong than she liked to have been conducted on a bootless search. And horribly bootless it had proved. The Miss Dangerfields had acted subordinate parts, and, as even maternal partiality was forced to admit, had acted them ill; nothing could have been more commonplace and uninteresting than the appearance of either young lady among the wits and beauties whom Florence had collected on her stage. Erle had exhausted his ingenuity and patience in rescuing their part


of the performance from coming to a complete break-down. The languid murmur of applause which greeted its conclusion went to the mother's heart; it was considerate, kind, indulgent—and unbearably humiliating. Lady Dangerfield reflected ruefully, first, that she might have enhanced the family dignity by refusing to come at all, and next, that it was her own weakness that had betrayed her offspring to the present exposure. Conscience reminded her that Lord Scamperly's coronet lay at the bottom of the troubled waters where she and the objects of her solicitude had been diving with such ill success; it went on to suggest that private theatricals occupied an awful prominence amid the terrestrial snares against which her favourite orators were accustomed from Sunday to Sunday to warn the unstable members of their flock; as a parting dart, it reminded her that when the Duchess of Pondercast had a royal guest, and some tableaux vivants, and the Miss Dangerfields were *not* invited to take a part even in a chorus of peasant girls, their mother had expressed her deep sense of the impropriety of such an amusement, and her relief that the omission of her daughters from the programme had spared her the painful task of telling the

Duchess how 'sad' she thought it. As it was, the moral prestige had been thrown away, and no worldly counterpoise rewarded the sacrifice. It was irreligious, probably, to act; but to act badly, to look shy and awkward, to forget one's part, to be commiserated by half the county and derided by the rest, to be entirely snuffed out by a little school-girl like Nelly, and a hardened flirt like Florence—what epithet was terrible enough for sufferings like these? When Mrs. Vivien came up, and with a smile of transparent insincerity said—'Thank you so much, dear Lady Dangerfield, for coming to us to-night: your dear girls have been quite invaluable;' when Lord Scamperly abandoned them for half the evening, and at last, looking down his list of engagements, had the impertinence to ask for the twenty-second quadrille—at least three hours off, and probably never to be reached; when the Pondercast guardsmen, upon finding that they could not all valse at once with Nelly, went off to the supper-room, or stood in mournful magnificence in the doorway, and showed no inclination for another partner; when, bitterest of all, Erle, who had had every opportunity during the last fortnight of becoming thoroughly intimate, seemed suddenly oblivious

of his two pupils' existence, and after declaring that he was far too exhausted to dance or talk, suddenly regained his legs and tongue, and made the best use of both, at the discovery that Margaret was disengaged; when a host of unintentional slights and petty mortifications blotted out one by one a mother's hopes, and dissipated the cloudy outline of matrimonial air castles, the thought of which had till now sustained her; then it was that ire, remorse, disappointment, repentance—all the concurrent elements of a moral tempest—took possession of Lady Dangerfield's soul, and like the unharmonious tenants of Æolus's cave, raged all the more fiercely from the compression which they endured, and the narrow limits to which their outbursts were confined. No monarch's hand was ready to allay the storm, and Lady Dangerfield accordingly came home in a frame of mind by no means conducive to the preservation of domestic tranquillity, or to the comfort of those who fell within the scope of her commands. Everybody in the house and village had soon good reason to know that a screw was loose in the machinery of her ladyship's moral being. Her daughters, the involuntary occasion of the storm, naturally felt its full severity; she

animadverted upon their demeanours, their dress, their conversational powers, and their personal appearance, in terms of inconvenient frankness. Honesty is at once a mother's right and duty, and the young ladies, already a little dispirited by the Clyffe performance, submitted to a maternal crushing with tears in their eyes and resignation in each gentle bosom. They knew too well to need additional assurance, that Nature had not been lavish in her gifts, and that after all which Art could effect for them, the result was sadly disproportionate. Masters could not make them accomplished; milliners and maids despaired of their looking well dressed. For this very ball, the famous Madame Barbarossa, in Regent-street, had worked two apprentices to death in their behalf; a useless murder, for the dresses were completely ineffective, and seemed by their very costliness to render their wearers' appearance more than ever unpretending; consequently, when Lady Dangerfield found fault vaguely, and implied that many precious advantages were being wasted on a thankless soil, her daughters tacitly admitted the humiliating truth, and bore the upbraiding with appropriate meekness. Sir Agricola, however, was by no means equally submissive. He believed

in his country, his party, and himself; in a long rent roll, a submissive tenantry, and as loyal a set of constituents as any Tory gentleman need wish to address; he cheerfully accorded to his wife a sort of theological ascendancy in return for her abdication of the world of politics to himself; he listened to her harangues about the Church because he expected her to listen to his harangues about the empire; but there was a point at which submission ceased, and that point Lady Dangerfield showed every symptom of reaching as speedily as possible. There was a skirmish over the carriage at breakfast, some heavy artillery practice at luncheon about an impending party, and a pitched battle at dinner about their summer plans. Sir Agricola sat at his end of the table, calm, dignified, and immovable; and clearly let his wife understand that the intimidation of a British senator was a task beyond her reach. Lady Dangerfield, baffled, turned upon a less resisting foe, struck terror into the nursery, fulminated wrathful edicts against the servants' hall, initiated an exchange of bellicose literature between the clergyman and herself, and sweeping from cottage to cottage in a paroxysm of righteous indignation, made the lives of her poorer neighbours a burthen to them.





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‘That is an odious house,’ she said, ‘and odious people. Florence is a most undesirable companion for the dear girls.’

‘You were glad enough to take them to the theatricals,’ suggested the other.

‘Horrid theatricals!’ exclaimed her ladyship, beginning, as experience warned her to do when no other convenient retort presented itself, to weep profusely; ‘when I look to you for sympathy, Sir Agricola, this is how you receive me—with a sneer.’

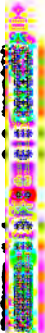
‘God forbid!’ cried her husband, who knew the ‘tear’ manœuvre too well to be the least impressed, and was rapidly getting into a passion; ‘what, pray, am I to sympathise about? As respects the Vivians, you know that I dislike them as much as yourself.’

‘I do more than dislike them,’ said Lady Dangerfield, solemnly; ‘I wish we had never called; I deplore having joined in their horrid gaieties. I told you none of the Pondercast party would come, and they did not—except a few stray bachelors.’

‘Who found the Castle slow and wanted a lark,’ put in her husband. ‘Well, I find the Duke rather dull myself.’

‘Such a set!’ Lady Dangerfield continued,

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lively cobra di capello from beneath the library table, Lady Dangerfield could scarcely have thrown a more heartfelt agony into the 'Here!' which burst from her lips at this last announcement. To welcome the enemy to one's own head-quarters at the very outset of the campaign was a proceeding completely at variance with her military scheme, and the thorough-going hostility to which she hoped that her husband might be speedily committed, ought, she felt, to preclude the least attempt at negotiation. The fact was, that Sir Agricola was known at head-quarters to be wavering. At the last quarter sessions the county magistrates had discussed the Boilers in solemn conclave, and a great many excellent arguments had been urged against them. The Heavyshire Boiler was a particularly bad one; the county rates had been affected; the guardians of the Union in which it stood complained of the hardship of having to support its disabled officials; a sturdy squire, whose trout-stream it had polluted, spoke out courageously, and declared that it did more harm than good. Sir Agricola, who had a latent scheme for buying its site and turning it into a brick-kiln for his tiles, began to be convinced. Then Slap had discussed the

matter in a friendly way over the claret at Clyffe, and had disarmed the projected reform of half its terrors. Heaven and earth, would not, he demonstrated, come together just because a few dozy old gentlemen ceased to draw their quarter's salary for doing nothing; the Boilers were no integral part of the constitution, but a mere excrescence. 'Suppose,' he said, 'I had a wart on the end of my nose; should I be any the less Slap because some friendly hand robbed me of so unseemly an appendage?' Sir Agricola, filling up his glass, was obliged to admit that his identity would remain unimpaired. Then, Slap craftily suggested, what caused the French Revolution? what ruined the aristocracy? what expelled the landed proprietors?—why, the insane defence of obsolete institutions. 'The world will march, Sir Agricola,' he said, oracularly, 'despite all we can do to hold it still; and the people who won't move out of the way get crushed for their pains.' The worthy baronet shuddered as he thought of his paternal acres portioned among a red-capped mob, of Lady Dangerfield and himself arraigned before a revolutionary committee, and with an awful shout of

Tremblez, tyrans, voilà les Sansculottes!





ringing in his ears, resolved that self-preservation was the noblest law of nature, and that if the surrender of the Royal Boilers could save society, the sacrifice, however serious, must be undergone.


His wife approached the subject from a totally different point of view: the Duchess held her under a spell: pleasant visits to Pondercast Castle flitted alluringly before her imagination; the necessity of preserving her country was one thing, the necessity of finding husbands for her daughters was another. How could a measure be right that had brought the Duke within an inch of apoplexy? Then Mr. Slap was the Viviens' friend, and against the Vivien Lady Dangerfield felt especially bellicose. They fell decidedly short of her standard of propriety; they were aspiring, self-possessed, and completely defiant of the tacit conventional code which would have restricted them to a subordinate position. Florence Vivien treated the Miss Dangerfields with the easy condescension of acknowledged superiority; Lady Dangerfield herself, who could frown down most people, fired her blackest looks in vain at Mrs. Vivien. Sir Agricola quailed in argument before the Major, and fell an easy

prey to Mr. Slap. Dislike had long been smouldering; the moment for open warfare had at length arrived. Two factions were to divide the county, and as the Duke was to head the one, and the Vivians were committed to the other, what right-feeling mother could hesitate as to the preferable alliance? If the Boilers were good in themselves, how much better did they become with such foes and friends as these. Therefore it was, that when Lady Dangerfield heard that Slap was likely to be her guest, she determined promptly on the stubbornest possible resistance. High swelled the tide of battle; this way and that the fortunes of the day inclined; the Baronet was firm, the lady passionate; now politics predominated, now social interests, now personal animosity. Sir Agricola fixed his thoughts on the possibility of an impending revolution, and mentally nailed his colours to the mast. Lady Dangerfield, with Pondercast Castle in her eye, ran through a rapid gamut of tears, protests, supplications, and exhausted the whole cycle of conjugal oratory. The spirits of either antagonist rose: experience warned the husband against the least concession, maternal anxiety encouraged the wife to be inflexible. Both

controversialists showed themselves adepts at that rhetorical manœuvre which consists in reiterating an argument with ever-increasing loudness at each attempted refutation; both became too heated to be persuasive, and racked their brains for the strongest rather than the most accurate forms of speech. The gentleman turned bright red, the lady dingy yellow; the one ceased to be feminine, the other forgot to be polite; all the British lion flashed from the Baronet's eyes; the wife, the mother, and the woman—all outraged alike—struggled for expression in his spouse's throbbing breast. Language at last became wholly inadequate to the necessities of the occasion; Lady Dangerfield's sobs rose wildly into a scream, and she sank back inarticulate and hysterical on the sofa. Sir Agricola, scarlet with indignation, stalked away to the window, ejaculating with a vehemence all the more expressive from the ordinary gentleness of his discourse—

‘Confound the Royal Boilers!’

Need the historian add that Mr. Slap was *not* invited, and that, before the summer was over, Sir Agricola had consented to be patron of a grand garden entertainment, at which no partisan of the



Vivien clique should find admission, and where the lawful immunity of the State Boilers from hostile criticism might be asserted with all the pomp and circumstance necessary to impress it duly upon the popular understanding.

That entertainment was indeed a scene upon which Lady Dangerfield was able to look back in aftertime with feelings of unqualified pride and satisfaction. In the first place it cost some trouble to achieve. Like the Irish Church, it was not only an instrument of religion, but a trophy of conquest: it placed Sir Agricola's submission in a pleasant light. Then fortune smiled upon the proceedings: the day was cloudless; Dangerfield Hall was looking its prettiest; the best half of the best society of the county was congregated on the lawn; a refreshing tone of well-bred conversation pervaded the assembly, and obliterated in the mind of the delighted hostess the painful recollections of her recent rude contact with the vulgar world. Well-behaved, orderly young men, the embryo monarchs of the soil, clustered beneath the trees, and conducted gently decorous flirtations with the daughters of the house. The Duke was too ill for any public appearance; but the Duchess, with her second

son, a suckling statesman, arrived in state; and Lord Ernest Fitz-Dawdle, grateful for an opportunity of airing an oratory more ambitious than effective, achieved a really brilliant success. Emblematic banners, rich with the toil of many a Tory finger, fluttered gaily in the air, and forbade the true significance of the occasion to be for an instant lost sight of. 'True Blue and the Royal Boiler!' 'Our Hearths, our Homes, and our Kettles!' 'God Save the State Stoker!' and other equally inspiriting sentiments, caught the eye, drooping in eloquent gracefulness from every point to which bunting could be attached. Processions of school-children, marshalled on different sides of the park, confronted each other before the drawing-room windows, and chanted amœbæan strains, composed expressly for the day in honour of endangered privilege.

Sir Agricola's troop of yeoman, gallantly marching to the scene of action, endangered their horses' peace of mind and their own equilibrium by the zealous performance of too-complicated manœuvres. Beef and beer, and all the substantial luxuries of a rustic repast, were distributed in invigorating abundance by glittering Hebes to each newly-arrived contingent of the

Dangerfield tenantry. Presently one of the curates, followed by the village schoolmaster, the village shopman, two publicans, and half-a-dozen farmers, approached the dais, where the *haute noblesse* of the occasion were placed, and presented the petition, which was to have gone to Parliament, but for the withdrawal of the 'State Boiler Enquiry'—a piece of unused artillery, ready at any moment to go off should Radicalism once again be in the ascendant. Lord Ernest received the precious document, and announced its contents to the applauding multitude. The petitioners, so the British legislative was to have been informed, had learned with grief and alarm of a design to strike a blow at a useful, a time-honoured, a venerable branch of the executive. A survey of contemporaneous history convinced them that the practice of 'State Boiling' was intimately connected with the happiness, the morals, and the well-being of society. They deprecated any departure from the good old order of things; they implored their representatives to protect them from unprincipled innovation; they would ever hope and pray for the safety of the Church, the dignity of the Crown, and the unimpaired efficiency of every branch of the public service.



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the light in which a true patriot would view them: he would honour their venerable ineffectiveness, as Madame de Staël at the sight of the Campagna, he would exclaim 'J'aime cette noble inutilité' ('Hear, hear-r-r!' from a tipsy yeoman); he would consider their dilapidations half their charm; he would preserve these in all their interesting integrity. There was once a time, as the poet sang—

When cobblers left their stalls in the lurch,  
And fell to patch and botch the Church.

Now the cobblers wanted to try their hand on the Royal Boilers: would they permit it? never! The idea of having their beloved Boilers patched, and botched, and cobbled, and—he almost shuddered to use the expression—copper-bottomed, was one from which every feeling mind would shrink in horror. They burst sometimes, it was true, but show him the institution that was faultless; and, then, did not an occasional explosion throw a charm over the monotony of country life? In conclusion, he would say to the levelling faction, run your wild career, assail the Church, defame the aristocracy, criticise Parliament, ay, call in question the sacred prerogative of the Crown, but

in the name of every tender memory, every hallowed association, spare, oh spare, our Boilers!

If action be eloquence, and the rapid gesticulation of two lavender gloves deserve the name of action, Lord Ernest well earned the plaudits which crowned the conclusion of his speech. The enthusiasm, at any rate, was universal: each sturdy banqueter thumped and banged applause: Lady Dangerfield wiped away a tear, the tipsy yeoman at the other end of the table had to be held down by the tails of his coat, and Sir Agricola, turning to the Duchess, declared that, after all, the nation was sound at heart, and that the State Boilers were, for another century at least, secure against all innovation.



## CHAPTER III.

## SOUTHWARDS.

———She had  
 A heart . . . how shall I say . . . too soon made glad;  
 Too easily impressed : she liked whate'er  
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
 . . . O, sir, she smiled no doubt  
 Whene'er I passed her : but who passed without  
 Much the same smile ? This grew : I gave commands ;  
 Then all smiles stopped together.

M. BALZAC has a theory, highly creditable to his patriotism, to account for the fact that two nations, such near neighbours as his and ours, should take such widely different views as to the merits of foreign travel. It is, he says, perfectly natural ; a Frenchman can never be so well off as at Paris : every day's exile, therefore, is so much loss. An Englishman, on the contrary, finds every spot a good exchange for London, and expatriation accordingly is the first of luxuries. Be that as it may, it is certain that a large amount of British

spleen is year by year thrown to the winds somewhere between Folkestone and Boulogne ; another heavy load of melancholy vanishes on the road from Paris to Marseilles ; three cloudless days of the Mediterranean complete the cure, and prepare the traveller, as he climbs the Pincian Hill to take his first look at Rome, or wakes in Paradise in the Bay of Naples, to rise for once into a more mercurial mood, and to admit that mere physical existence is after all not without its charms.

Charles and his bride, at any rate, felt their spirits rise as day by day England and English interests were left further behind them. Nelly was enchanted at a completely novel scene, and the amusing variety of such fresh acquaintance as the accidents of travel brought across their path. Her companion, though falling short of rapture, had something of a painter's eye for picturesque effect, and threw himself into a congenial mood of unlaborious enjoyment. His energy was just sufficient for the petty fatigues of an easy posting journey. He displayed a fitful zeal for churches and picture-galleries, and rose occasionally to an artistic enthusiasm which Nelly could not even make a pretence of understanding. He lingered with tedious fondness before views

or portraits that scarce tempted her to a second glance. The unearthly loveliness of the Virgin Mother, as Raphael's holy imagination saw her; the infant already instinct with divinity; the anguish and terror of martyrdoms and crucifixions; the voluptuous penitence of some golden-haired Magdalene; Last Suppers, and Marriages, and Miracles—all the thrice-told story of Christian art—how well she seemed to know them, and how tedious all! What wearisome expeditions with guides and catalogues, and explanatory rhapsodies of encomium! 'This glorious masterpiece,' said Murray, 'the wonder and delight of all who once grasp the painter's daring scheme: the exquisite harmony—the profound pathos—the symmetrical arrangement,'—and so forth. Nelly found out the masterpiece's number, and stared in blank disappointment—harmony, pathos, symmetry—what were they but idle sounds to her? Why would people talk so? A mother, just like any other mother; a baby, the counterpart of a hundred little wretches outside; an old man offering a crown; grim, emaciated saints kneeling awkwardly around; a clumsy angel hovering overhead; and yet here were twenty copiers reverentially at work, two columns of criticism



in her guide book, a stanza from 'Childe Harold,' a couplet from Rogers, or a glowing paragraph from Ruskin—all declaring it divine! In the mirrored shutter of the next alcove Nelly could catch sight of a childlike graceful form, and lace and ribands, and the pink roses of a Paris bonnet, all most artistically arranged, and the prettiest imaginable little pair of hands, and a face as bright at least as any on the walls around her; and shutting up her 'Murray' with a sigh which breathed more content than melancholy, privately resolved that, despite all that artists could say, ugly people were ugly, and vice versâ; and that few of the pictures which cost so much trouble and expense to see, were half as interesting as the one which, as often as she pleased, she was at liberty to study gratis in her looking-glass.

Charles in the meantime had pretty accurately gauged his companion's powers, and was by no means surprised at any fresh display of childishness. When he was in good spirits she amused him: he submitted to her foibles with a half contemptuous equanimity. If she preferred the sketches in 'La Mode' to Titian or Murillo, and living Apollos, that moved and talked, to the time-stained marbles of the Vatican—was she not

young, and flighty, and, above everything, a woman? Was not the wise course to pet this pretty child as her nature seemed to crave, not to be fretting for an unattainable ideal, but to indulge her caprices, and compound for a quiet life at the price of an acquiescence which it cost so little to concede? How easy to lower himself to the level at which Nelly would naturally meet him, to narrow his aspirations to the scope of hers, to make her tastes and sympathies his rule: she loved to trifle, and ought not a husband to humour her? Their intercourse, if not very elevated, was at least tolerably enjoyable; and how many married couples could say much more? Some illusions were gone, of course; but then everything loses somewhat of its romance on close acquaintance, and a lover's extravagance is necessarily ephemeral. Charles would not, at any rate, confess himself disappointed, and that, in the greatest stake of all, he had drawn a blank. There was no escape, and his disposition made content an easy virtue.

Into this artificial calm, however, a discordant note would occasionally break. A letter would arrive from Underwood, breathing an earnestness, a pathos, a vehemence of affection for which Charles

felt himself thoroughly out of tune. Margaret was seldom demonstrative, and yet every now and then a chance expression implied that her sister's happiness must be intense. Charles's heart misgave him, as he thought of the uninteresting calmness of his own feelings towards his wife; then would come some grave words of counsel from the Squire, half-playful, half-melancholy; or, worst of all, recollections of his early days, when, half a century before, he too had travelled with his bride in Italy—a journey which the old man still talked of with enthusiasm. Both he and Margaret seemed to have drifted away in thought from the real Nelly, who left them so recently; and, as if incredulous of a triviality which found no counterpart in their own minds, to have endowed their conception of her with an imaginary pathos.


‘Do not, my dear child,’ the Squire wrote, ‘become quite absorbed in the dream of pleasure which you are enjoying, nor shut out all other loves for the one which, I daresay, seems now to leave space in your heart for nothing beside itself.’

Nelly read it tranquilly through, and her husband smiled to see her pass on with keener interest to news of an archery meeting, a tea-party, or a dance. To Charles, the Squire, warmed



While he yet stood on the inn's balcony struggling against another less welcome explanation, there came a cracking of whips, a jingling of bells, a sudden roll of wheels, and a dusty travelling-carriage rumbled into the court below. Out of it appeared a large, uncouth, shaggy Englishman, attired with that magnificent disregard of convention that characterises the travelling Briton. Charles, delighted at the sight of a familiar face, in an instant ran down stairs to greet his friend: it was Broadthwait, once a Fellow of St. Faith's, and now a curate in Lincolnshire. Charles's spirits rose suddenly at the prospect of a chat over college days. When he reached the court the dusty giant was perfectly absorbed in helping out a little creature—pale, commonplace, unlovely—whom he seemed to treat with the same benevolent tenderness as a good-natured bear might some fragile treasure committed to its charge. Broadthwait, however, got his wife safe to the ground without breaking her, and was standing amid a heap of packages when Charles approached.

'Broadthwait!' he cried, breaking in upon a wild Italian harangue, which the new comer was inflicting upon his *vetturino* about his luggage.



‘Evelyn!’ said the other, ‘how do you do?’

And then the harangue began again, till at last the Signora’s missing box was found; and the Signora herself—dusty, and tired, and untidy—had to be conducted upstairs, and her good-natured bear, too full of her to think of anything else, forgot his old friend, and left him standing in the inn-yard disconsolate. Afterwards they met at the table-d’hôte, and the two brides were introduced, and Charles began to hope that they had found companions. The long days’ posting were oppressively monotonous.

‘Should they journey together to Bologna?’ he asked. ‘One carriage would take them all capitally.’

‘Georgie,’ the Bear enquired, ‘are we going to Bologna, and shall we accept Mr. Evelyn’s offer?’

The little pale face lit suddenly up, and the eyes, kindling with animation, said as plainly as possible—‘No; my Bear and I will travel on together, and not even as far as Bologna will we lose our *tête-à-tête*.’

So some ready objection was produced, and the plan fell through, and Charles somehow began to feel as if he were alone in the world. That night the Bear came down to have a smoke, the first,



he declared, since his marriage-day; and completed his friend's discomfort by ignoring every subject but one, and calling heaven and earth to attest the felicity of love in a cottage, as exemplified in a Lincolnshire curacy with three hundred pounds a-year.

'I earned a hundred pounds,' he said, as if apologising for his extravagance, 'from all you blockheads at St. Faith's; and a fellow ought to be completely jolly for once in his life—ought he not?'

'And you don't regret the old place?' asked Charles. 'What pleasant rooms yours were!'

'Pleasant!' cried the other, with the greatest contempt, 'everything pleasant for me began six weeks ago.'

Next morning the dusty travelling-carriage rumbled off. The Bear's good-natured face was seen radiant at the window; and Charles, provoked at the contrast which all men's lots seemed to offer to his own, sat moodily over his grandfather's letter, till Nelly, at work at her Diary, recalled his attention by a yawn; and offering him a penny for his thoughts, enquired the name of the ugly little creature they met the night before.

‘Ugly!’ cried the other, bursting with a laugh, ‘you should have heard Broadthwait talk! She is the queen of beauty. We husbands are so blind! Turn your face, Nelly, and let me see if it is really as pretty as I tell you.’

‘Well,’ she said, looking up, and trying to read the doubtful expression of her husband’s eyes, ‘what do you think of it?’

‘Loveliness itself,’ said Charles.

And Nelly, by no means certain from his tone that she was not being laughed at, retreated, pouting, to her Journal, and inscribed in it the solemn experience that her husband could often be dull, and sometimes extremely impertinent.

‘There!’ she cried, ‘I have written something disagreeable about you, Master Charley, in return for that rude speech.’

‘Next week,’ her husband said, the sarcasm still lingering in his tones, ‘you will have to record your emotions on entering the sacred city. Pray, leave a wide margin for the first rapture of St. Peter’s. By Thursday I hope we shall be in Rome.’

‘By Thursday?’ cried Nelly; ‘delightful! Do you know I was beginning to feel quite home-sick. These dreary old towns depress me.’

‘Well,’ answered Charles, ‘Rome will, I hope, be to your taste. Art and antiquities in the morning, rides on the Campagna in the afternoon, and as many dances and tea-parties as you have strength for in the evening.’

‘If we could but start to-night!’ Nelly said, with new-found zeal, her home-sickness suddenly forsaking her. ‘And there are quantities of English?’

‘Quantities,’ said her companion, ‘of any age, sex, and quality you please—young, masculine, and agreeable ones among the rest.’

Nelly cried ‘hush!’ and laying her hands across his lips, brought his oration to an involuntary close. Charles’s pleasantry on the subject was rather too serious to be quite amusing, nor could her conscience absolutely acquit her of an aptitude for flirtation, and a pleased consciousness of the homage which her pretty looks secured.

Charles found that the husband of a beauty must often be content to play a second part; he came in for some of that ready politeness—humiliating thought!—which was the natural tribute to his wife’s picturesque appearance. Parties were announced in *their* honour, which he knew were really given in *hers*. Men came and sought his


acquaintance, only as a stepping-stone to an introduction. He had gained importance in the world, but not exactly of the sort he liked. Mr. Poppet, for instance, the prince of coxcombs, who cut everybody he dared, and had been accustomed to greet him with a haughty severity, had fallen in with them at Genoa, displayed a sudden politeness, insisted upon coming next day to call at his hotel, and evinced, ever after, the most distressing amiability. And yet, a month before, Poppet would have passed him with an icy stare; it was to Nelly, her husband blushed to feel, that the call was paid.

Nelly, on her part, had not been slow to appreciate the ascendancy which such distinctions gave her, and sometimes, in a moment of vexation, played off a childish coquetry against the sullen or negligent moods into which from time to time her husband fell, or the dulness which, despite of all distractions, she felt not unfrequently creeping over herself.

Fortune, however, had an unexpected interest in store for them. The novelty of Rome had just began to wear away, and Nelly showed symptoms of returning restlessness, when Charles, one evening, entering the Club, caught sight of a

dark head bent lazily over a game of *écarté*, and heard a voice which he recognised at once as Malagrida's. While he yet hesitated, the game came to an end, and the Count's keen eyes, peering into the mirror opposite, rested on the new-comer's form, and cut off the possibility of polite retreat. Malagrida rose, pushed a little heap of Napoleons across the table to his antagonist, called for a cigarette, and coming across the room to Charles, disarmed his surliness by a courtesy and good-nature which nothing could baffle.

The brigands, he said, had been hovering in his neighbourhood, had pillaged a neighbouring villa, and had driven him—he thanked them heartily—for a week or two to Rome; he had come only the day before, and had not heard of Charles's arrival. The signora was in Rome, of course?—he must come at once to pay his homage. Could they not make use of him? What was there that they wished to see?—a chapel, a cardinal, a catacomb, the Holy Father himself in a private interview? 'I know everybody and everything,' the Count said, 'and I lay my knowledge at your feet. Make good use of me forthwith, and thank the good saint who



threw such a useful commodity across your path.'

Who could resist so much frank politeness? Charles grew ashamed of his morose behaviour, and forgot his old grudges and suspicions as the Count chatted pleasantly on.


'Ah!' he cried, 'here one begins to breathe again! your English life stifles me; its gloom, its conventionality, its unrest, its vulgar wealth, its canting pietism, its stupid superstitions, gave me, I confess, a qualm. Then the things one eats and drinks! I shudder to think of it! Dinners, and climate, and creed, all alike detestable!

'Superstitions!' cried Charles, 'come, come! you are pretty well off yourselves, as far as that goes.'

'Pooh!' said the Count. 'Suppose a few miracles, more or less, what then? Why grudge the poor wretches that swarm about the churches a harmless edification. "*Il faut leur laisser le don du ciel*," as some one used to say. But here are the cards; let us have half an hour's *écarté*, and then to bed—and to-morrow you shall complete my conversion.'

Before the game was finished, Charles's last prejudice was gone, and Malagrida had established

his position as confidential friend. Nelly was excited at the news of his impending visit, and next day sat listening, with flushed cheek and beating heart, to the bell, which would announce the arrival of the earliest and most dignified of her admirers.





## CHAPTER IV.

## BEAUTY'S PERILS.

Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,  
 When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,  
 When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,  
 And Innocence is closing up his eyes.

THE Count speedily convinced his new-found friends that their method of Roman sight-seeing was, to say the least of it, inexperienced. Nelly's nascent enthusiasm died away at the breath of a single well-bred sneer. The languid, inscrutable eyes of the *blasé* Italian, lit up with amusement as she recounted to him the list of their first week's amusements—churches, catacombs, palaces, pictures, and curiosities; old prisons and new villas—enough, he declared, for half a lifetime of anyone but an enterprising English woman.

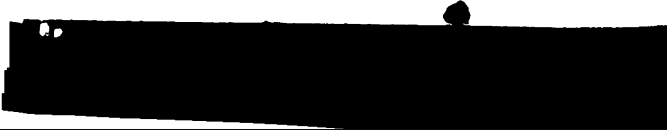
‘But you have a right,’ he said laughingly,  
 ‘as an Anglo-Saxon, to show us lazy Southerners

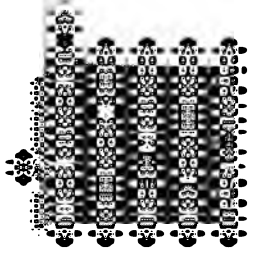
what energy really means. Britons, bustling as they always are, nowhere get in so great a bustle as in this dreary old ruin of ours—a mere corpse in brick and mortar. The incongruity is delightful, is it not?’

‘I confess,’ answered Charles, ‘to being rather bored with my countrymen—one hates so rude a clash of old and new. A Yankee told me yesterday that he found Rome “a very one-hoss affair,” and half the English folk are nearly as profane. Who was it, Nelly, that asked you gravely, whether you had “done your Pope?”’

“Done your Pope!” cried Malagrida. ‘I like the cockney impudence of that amazingly; but that is the great objection to scepticism, it is almost invariably in bad taste. “Done your Pope,” indeed!’

‘Yes,’ cried Charles, warming up into an invective; ‘and go where you will, you find the British Dowager, starched, and prim, and Protestant, and as much at home as in May Fair; or you stand on some ruin where every brick is twenty centuries old at least, and the miraculous is all about you, and legend grows truer than history, and anything seems likelier than the cold, dry nineteenth century, and then in bustles





her swept by a single ruthless sarcasm, from the pinnacle round which of late her thoughts had been so busily playing. Yet the Count spoke decidedly, and his condemnation robbed each expected pleasure of half its charm. By degrees, however, Nelly reconciled herself to the change. The Princess's parties, if not so large, noisy, or brilliant as those which she was learning to despise, had a quiet luxury of their own, and an air of exclusiveness, which was not without its charm. The guests were few, and the general tone of familiarity befitted a little *coterie* apart from and above the common social herd. The Princess welcomed the young bride with a well-bred gentleness, that put her shy mood at once to flight. Malagrida himself volunteered to teach her *écarté*, and spent three quarters of an hour in loosing twopence halfpenny in her behalf. The ladies of the party exhibited a flattering curiosity, the gentlemen were charmed with an archness, innocence, naïveté, which Nelly's imperfect Italian set off to the best possible advantage. Instinct soon told her that she was successful; and her success, since it was impossible for her husband to share it, became a new barrier between them. Charles found the Princess's evenings insupport-

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grace, and felt more like a savage than he was well able to conceal. The Princess attributed his clumsiness to the incurable *mauvaise honte* of young Englishmen, and privately rallied Malagrida upon his half-civilised protégé. Nelly, meanwhile, passed triumphantly through each new ordeal, added week by week to her list of conquests; and secure in the tranquillity of an unimpassioned nature, left one prudish maxim after another behind her, and enjoyed with entire complacency the ready homage which all around her seemed prepared to yield.

Charles became increasingly uneasy. His conscience smote him. The society, in which he was living, and suffering his wife to live, though superficially correct enough, shocked his moral taste. It was pure, perhaps, yet it suggested the nearness of impurity; no systematic outrage was committed, yet on the whole there seemed an indifference to crime, a tacit sneer at virtue, a ready condonation of offences, which English wives and husbands are accustomed to consider beyond the pale of forgiveness. That it was indolent, aimless, and guided by no principle but the moment's pleasure, might be excusable in Italians; but its Epicureanism seemed revoltingly

self-centred, and its calm disregard of every great human interest left Charles with a dreary sense of something mean, narrow, and heartless. And this was the school to which he had brought his wife to learn her first real experience of her new position; here it was that he left her day after day, surrounded by men, who seemed obviously unprincipled; by women, whose standard of taste and duty was at any rate not the highest; by flattery, which Nelly's childish playfulness rendered natural, but which was none the less a dangerous atmosphere for such a nature as her's to breathe. Was it right—sensible—was it even the conduct of a man of honour to leave her unadvised amid such evil fascinations? And yet, suggested Pride, it would be too humiliating to show a symptom of jealousy, to betray the least consciousness of alienation, to secure a wife's decorous behaviour by appeals to her generosity, by assertions of one's own claims; by complaint, remonstrance, entreaty. Who could stoop so low as this to suit a school-girl's flighty mood—to afford her, very likely, exactly the sort of triumph upon which her foolish heart was set—to occupy, for ever after, the undignified position of a slighted and uneasy husband? What ground,



moreover, was there in Nelly's character which would give such an appeal the slightest chance of success? Charles thought over his intercourse with her, and was startled to find how little of seriousness, depth, pathos, it had about it. It had its fond moments certainly, but how trivial a fondness! What room did it afford for grave, earnest counsel, for tender reproach, for the accusations of an over-anxious love, which, giving all, demands all in return, and grudges every look, or wish, or pleasure which is not its own? No; if Nelly chose to flirt, Charles resolved that he at least would never condescend to seem displeased. Men might come and go, and he would consult his dignity by indifferent good nature to all alike. After all, what cause for fear? why trouble himself about baby-coquetries, which implied no more than a feminine aptitude for compliment, and the innocent exhilaration of a buoyant nature, for the first time completely mistress of itself. So Charles retired more and more behind the barrier of his own thoughts, and left his wife to amuse herself in the way most congenial to her taste. The Princess excused him easily enough from her parties, and Nelly was perfectly happy under her protection. At the Club Charles found

a rubber of whist always awaiting him, a crowd of idle Englishmen, the latest piece of gossip, and the sort of companionship, of which, since his marriage, he had begun so bitterly to feel the want. He threw himself into it with the increased eagerness which abstinence engenders, and relapsed with easy rapidity into the old pleasures of bachelor existence. How careless, light-hearted, enjoyable a life it seemed, and how could men so lightly abandon it for the doubtful privileges and certain troubles of another state? What had Nelly given him in return for his independence, his companions, his amusements? troublesome plans, long bills, a volume of dress criticism, and an average of two quarrels a day. Nay, was she not probably, at that very moment, the centre of half-a-dozen odious fops, and her heart, if heart she had, the property of each one quite as much as her husband's? Surely women were better as anybody else's possession than one's own: some women—whispered conscience; and thereupon Charles's thoughts ran back, as now they were constantly doing, to the old home life, once so cheaply prized; to the quick sympathy, the fastidious taste, the clear, calm sense, the pure, fervent nature, once within his reach, from

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with what success? Charles tried in vain to conceal from himself the impatience with which he watched his friend's arrival, and the burning desire he experienced to know all that could be known. He scarcely dared trust himself to ask, and yet why should the answer be especially interesting? Unfortunately, all the interest of life seemed centred in it. Anstruther's reply, however, when he arrived, was in the highest degree unsatisfactory. He had, evidently, no authority for the hint with which the letter ended. He forgot having said anything about Erle's proceedings at the Manor: of course he was flirting; at least, it would not be Erle if he were not. Charles must remember what desperate love he tried to make at Clyffe, and how excellently Miss St. Aubyn had put him down—the coxcomb that he was, and the ten times worse coxcomb he would now become, with 3,000*l.* a-year, and a house of his own: and then people said the Duke was going to back him at the next elections, and to turn out Major Vivien, in revenge for his ratting about the Boilers. Fancy Erle in a senatorial mood! 'Fancy!' Charles said, absently, lost to everything but a single point of his informer's gossip. 'By the way, Anstruther, here is an

invitation for you from the Princess Torrio, who has chosen to fall in love with my wife; and if you find her party as dull as I know I shall, you will come away here early for some écarté and a smoke with me.'

Anstruther, however, found the Princess's entertainment by no means so dull as his friend had led him to expect. Nelly, delighted to see a familiar face, showered the sunlight of her smiles upon him, and gave him clearly to understand that she was prepared to be confidential. Anstruther's easy frankness set her tongue freer than it had been for weeks. Charles bit his lip to see that his wife could be animated and talkative with everybody but himself; Mr. Poppet shrank abashed into the background; and even Malagrida, retreating in humiliation, acknowledged the undeniable advantage of being young, good-looking, and the latest comer.

## CHAPTER V.

## A FRIEND'S QUARREL.

You know that you are Brutus who say this,  
Or, by the Gods, this word were else your last!

ANSTRUTHER found himself in no danger of the *ennui* which sometimes overtakes the sojourner in Rome. Trained in a creed of versatile adoration, and provided by nature with a comely exterior and a feeling heart, he moved through life in an atmosphere of tenderness and sentiment, of sudden hope or regretful melancholy, which gave each month a history of its own, and though costing him on the one hand an occasional pang, secured him on the other a host of friends, a long list of entertainments, and an unusual insight into the foibles of the fairer portion of mankind. On the principle that '*quand on n'a pas ce qu'on aime, il faut aimer ce qu'on a,*' he offered the incense of a too idolatrous disposition at each convenient shrine near which his wanderings led him.

The very pink of honour, he endangered nothing but his own peace of mind; nor did the objects of his homage incur the slightest peril from a devotee whose enthusiasm was never indiscreet, whose chivalry was scrupulously pure, and who was as considerate for other people's feelings as he was reckless in respect of his own.

Charles's spirits rose in the society of a companion whom both he and his wife could agree in liking, and as to whose sincerity Distrust itself could scarcely feel suspicious. With him the weeks flowed pleasantly away: he formed a harmonious third to the matrimonial duet whose discords had hitherto been disagreeably frequent. Husband and wife seemed to suit each other better when he was with them; the Princess's gloomy *salon* lost half its charm; Malagrida's assiduities ceased to flatter; Nelly threw off her cloud, and became prettily endearing; and Charles began to believe himself once more in love. Still, however, from time to time the lurking hostility broke forth, and Anstruther quickly perceived that all was not as it should be. Charles struck him as strangely rough and harsh. Nelly's affectionate speeches, and little gracious acts, seemed to be almost repulsed. More than once Anstruther blushed for



very shame at some impolite sneer. What, he wondered, could the secret of the problem be? What had come over his old friend, the gentlest, kindest, and least morose of beings? Fortune surely had smoothed him an easy path; his bride seemed a very gleam of sunshine; his weak health, which might have plagued another man, a convenient pretext for the sort of indolence he loved; his home relations the ideal of all that was agreeable; and yet his brow was often dark, his mirth fitful and evanescent, his old, unconscious light-heartedness completely gone. Anstruther's philosophy was baffled: some mystery beyond his powers of penetration was, he felt, close at hand. Of one thing, however, he became increasingly assured—that if ever angels still walked this world of ours in human guise, and fluttered in Paris bonnets and Brussels shawls, the companion with whom two-thirds of every day just now were spent, deserved the name.

The Christmas ceremonies were past; the country was already ablaze with a warm Italian spring; and Anstruther, rejoicing in an extended leave, and wearied with the dingy streets and loaded atmosphere of Rome, began to tempt his friends still farther southward. Malagrida, too, had sent

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‘Every right to shun disagreeable people: however, I admit I am in a minority, so I suppose I am wrong; but I stick to my opinion. I am sorry you like her.’

‘Oh!’ said Nelly, with a tone of sullen resignation, ‘that means, I suppose, that I am not to go?’

‘Not at all,’ answered her husband, getting angry in his turn. ‘I will not dictate: we each have a right to our tastes. You must do as you feel inclined.’

‘I cannot help feeling inclined,’ Nelly said, with the tears in her eyes; ‘but I will not go, of course, if you dislike it.’

‘They are a bad set, dearest Nell,’ said her husband—‘false, heartless, bad.’

‘You were always with Count Malagrida at Rome,’ objected Nelly: ‘you seem to like him well enough.’

‘No,’ said the other, ‘I don’t like him. He lived with our set: he chose to come to the Club; he does his best to be pleasant: but no one trusts him. The other day some one lost a thousand francs to him at whist, and I believe I saw him cheat. Well, and do you know about his wife? He is cruel, insolent, and faithless to her, as any-

body may learn who hears him talk. I give you my word, Nelly, the fellow is a thorough rogue.'

Nelly came up to her husband, and with a half-comic, half-persuasive gesture laid her finger—the little taper finger that was yet strong enough to bend her husband's will—across his lips.

'You are a dear, old, suspicious goose,' she said, 'and you shall tell me no more gossip. Just because we are not in England you fancy every woman a Clytemnæstra, and every man Don Giovanni, with a dagger under his cloak!'

'Malagrida killed a man last year in a duel,' Charles said; 'and rumour says both the seconds call him "murderer." I do believe, if it comes to that, that he does carry a dagger under his cloak, and would use it, too, if occasion pressed him.'

'Dreadful!' cried Nelly, with a mock look of terror. 'Well, I do not suppose he will stab either you or me. I suppose I may go?'

'By all means,' answered her husband, with frigid politeness; 'and shall you want me?'

'You will want to come as much as anyone,' Nelly said, radiant once again. Captain Anstruther and you can go together, and make each other happy. Here is my hat. Now is not that a love?'

The hat was a pretty one; but Nelly's face had lost its spell.

'A love?' her husband said, with indifference provokingly sarcastic. 'It is indeed!'

'You are very unkind,' Nelly said, 'and a very bad judge of hats.'

'And of character, it appears,' replied her husband: 'however, I know nothing about either.'

'You know precisely the way to tease me,' said Nelly, impatiently. And as she was leaving the room, her cheek still flushed with excitement, and the new hat looking all that a new hat should, Captain Anstruther was announced, and, little knowing the dangerous ground upon which he trod, plunged forthwith into the Count's forthcoming entertainment.

'Of course,' he said, 'you mean to go. Malagrida is full of the scheme. I left him just now in the Toledo as excited about it as possible. We shall have a delicious day.'

Charles said not a word.

'I believe,' Nelly answered, with a hesitating air and a glance toward her husband, 'that we shall scarcely be able to come.'

'Impossible!' cried Anstruther, in a burst of disappointed surprise: 'it will spoil it all if you





mitted to a matrimonial quarrel, and taste, reason, and chivalry alike constrained him to throw his entire interest upon the lady's side. Charles, provoked at the exposure of a domestic fracas, resolved to bring it to a close.

‘Well,’ he said, imperatively, ‘we will not discuss it now any more, if you please.’

And Nelly forthwith, her heart full of resentment, began to beat a retreat. Anstruther's presence, and the consciousness of his alliance, inspired her with fresh courage, while it intensified her disappointment. Had her life depended on it she could not have resisted glancing upward at him as she left the room, and their eyes, as they met, bespoke on the one side interest and sympathy, on the other a sort of cry for aid. Anstruther's tender heart was smitten to the core. His cheeks, which still preserved the freshness of his innocent youth, flushed scarlet with suppressed indignation; and for the first time in his life he began to feel embarrassed at finding himself alone with his friend. Presently there came a faint sound of Nelly's sobs from the adjoining room, and Anstruther's blood rose rapidly to boiling heat. Charles was the first to break a rather awkward silence.

'The day is burning hot,' he said: 'let us go out and have an ice.'

'Thank you,' said the other, with an ostentatious politeness which was as rude as possible, 'I had rather not.'

'No?' said Charles; 'and why not, pray?'

'For the same reason, possibly,' replied his companion, speaking thick, and burning for the fray, 'that you had rather not go to the pic-nic—one's company is a matter of taste, you know.'

'Why, Anstruther,' cried Charles, springing up, and for the first time looking the other straight in the face, 'you are not going to turn against me, too, are you?'

'Turn against you?' said Anstruther. 'No. But you turn against yourself: you make one hate you. Look here, Evelyn; you and I have been friends a dozen years, and have never had an angry word that I remember; but you are changed of late, and not changed for the better. When I come here and see you behave as you have just been behaving to a woman whom anybody else would be inclined to worship, I cannot stand it. I defy any man to look on and not be indignant, disgusted! When I think who it is that does it, it fills me with amazement. Anyhow

we are friends no more. I could not take your hand. I should be sorry if I could. I should be a hypocrite if I pretended not to hate you.'

'Good God !' cried Charles, with an impatient gesture, 'did you come up here to insult me to my face, and lecture me on my duties to my wife? You must be mad to do it. Who on earth gave you leave to criticise and judge between us? Take my advice, and if you are going to talk like that, do it somewhere else, where——'

'I'll say my say,' replied the other, interrupting him, 'and I say it by the right that one man has to tell another when he is making a brute of himself. Everybody notices it, Evelyn. It is not my fancy; it is the common talk. You have had a piece of luck such as any man would give twenty years of life for, and you behave so that it makes me wild to see you, and to think that you were once my friend. You neglect her in society, as you force all the world to see: now you have shown me how you go on at home. Good morning!'

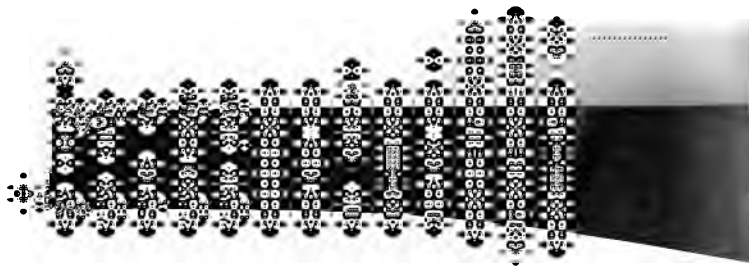
The tears stood thick in Anstruther's eyes: half passion against the husband, half tenderness towards the wife. Charles felt that he ought to be in a far greater passion than he really was,

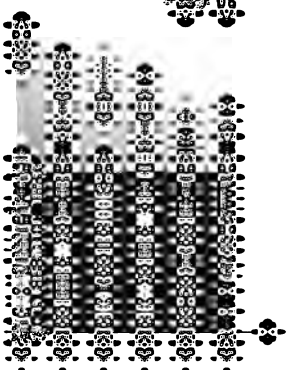
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a devastating horde, armed with hammers, saws, and trowels, and insatiable as the leech, which never relaxes its hold until absolute repletion brings its banquet to an unwelcome close. The old man lived alone, and accordingly indulged his hobby undisturbed. He looked on complacently at leaking roofs, unpainted doors, windows that refused to shut, beams which threatened an immediate overthrow of all that depended on their support. He took a morbid satisfaction in contrasting his own half-dismantled tenement with the costly trimness of other people's abodes, and lived to the end with a sort of vague belief that some day or other the wisdom of his own system would stand revealed, and his neighbours' recklessness receive its due reward of palpable bankruptcy. The consequence was that, year by year, time and weather, advancing unopposed, drove him within still narrower limits, and claimed a larger fraction of the house as their own. Now a bedroom became suddenly inundated, now the flooring of a passage broke away, now a chimney fell in, or a cataract of tiles formed an extempore moraine, steep and treacherous enough to test the prowess of an Alpine-clubsman, but decidedly inconsistent with the conventional processes of



domestic life. The master of the place retreated contentedly to the next secure position, chuckled over the follies of his fellow-men, and made up his mind more firmly than ever not to follow their example. By degrees other items of expenditure began to be curtailed: the stables stood untenanted, and kept pace with the house on the road to ruin; the garden became a wilderness; the woods were divided between poachers and vermin; and the two home-farms, which the proprietor chose to keep under his own supervision, ran riot with luxuriant crops of the very finest weeds. Still the old man stood firm, contrived a never-failing series of petty economies, supplied one ineffectual makeshift by another, and proved to his own entire satisfaction that his property paid him at the year's end at least as much as other people's. One day, however, he committed the involuntary extravagance of falling ill. The doctor, long resisted, was sent for at last, and declared the damp, the smells, and the coldness of the house, enough to kill a Hercules. Then came the attorney; and before the attorney had done his work, the undertaker; and a fortnight later Erle was left at liberty to work his will upon the musty skeleton of an abode, and to do battle as

best he might with an army of rats, jackdaws, and creeping things innumerable, who had at present firm possession of his new estate.

A year or two before Erle would have troubled himself as little as possible about so inconvenient a possession. The very idea of being forced to grapple with the results of another's deliberate neglect—of having to build, clean, contrive, of cutting down contractors' bills, of selecting from rival schemes, of performing all the tedious duties of landlord on a long-neglected estate—would have seemed insupportably wearisome. Nothing would have been heard of him for a month, and then a note, dated from Naples, or Constantinople, or somebody's yacht in the Mediterranean, would have authorised an agent to do whatever he pleased, and to make the best of a bad affair. Erle, however, had come to the Squire for advice, and the Squire at once put all such lazy schemes to flight. He remembered the place in the last owner's father's time, and declared it was a crying shame to let it remain in ruin. He came over with Erle, and rode about the estate, and examined the buildings, and recommended bailiffs and architects, and explained how the repairs must be set about, until his pupil became downright inter-

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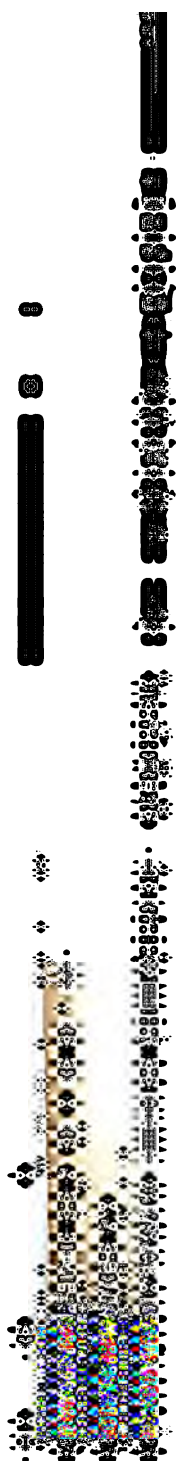
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all around you : there, my dear fellow, is your choice. Take an old man's advice ; believe me, no life can be happier than what you have before you, if only you set about it in earnest. You must come and live here, you know, or nothing will be properly done. You must empty that abominable pond, or you will catch the fever ; and clear away those trees, which positively stifle me even here. Then just look at the cottages—not fit to put a pig in : no air, no light, no warmth, no drains, no anything but certain disease ; every man, woman, and child who died in the parish these ten years was murdered by your uncle, whose only defence is that he was as crazy as possible, and poisoned himself at last.'

Erle burst out laughing.

'He little thought,' he said, 'that you would come to write his epitaph. Well, sir, and suppose the cottages done?'

'After the cottages,' said the Squire, by this time warmed up into a vehement mood, 'the school. That school yonder is a simple pest-house : nothing but the inherent strength of country children's constitutions could resist it ; in fact only the strong ones do resist it : the



and whose society would rescue the quietest country life from all risk of the tedium which at first sight seemed its necessary accompaniment. Margaret, however, showed no symptom of falling in love; and Erle, well versed in matters of the heart, spared her the annoyance and himself the humiliation of the refusal which he knew would be pronounced. Still, however, he ditched, drained, mended, and built; waged war upon the vermin world, expended a little sea of paint and whitewash with a perseverance which surprised himself; and if *ennui* sometimes took possession of his soul, and cowardice suggested a sudden flight, Hope bound him faster than ever to his task; and Margaret, despite all discouragement, was already firmly installed as tutelary goddess of his new domain.



Figure 1


13





yet it left him in a melancholy mood. Nelly, he knew, would not care in the least about it; to him every line had an unexplained charm. He scanned each sentence for some meaning, not at first apparent. Margaret wrote of her grandfather, the village, the tiny round of neighbouring affairs, of everything except herself; and yet she was everywhere apparent. She gave a long account of Erle's visit, of the Squire's zeal as his instructor, of the laudable but vain attempts of the agricultural neophyte to comprehend the mysteries of rotatory crops, subsoil draining, and the patent drill. 'I wish you could see them on the lawn together: grandfather, in full flow about chalk, and lime, and so forth; and Mr. Erle, looking as puzzled as possible, with yellow gaiters and a spud—a sort of rural burlesque—and ten times more a fop than ever! But he has quite made up his mind to be Sir Roger de Coverley at least, and to turn Sharnham into a modern Arcadia.' And so the letter ran on for half a page, and Charles began to ask himself whether we do not sometimes laugh at those whom we suspect ourselves of liking, and if Margaret were really as indifferent to her grandfather's guest as her ridicule was intended

to imply. And then, before his meditations were done, Nelly's voice, from the next room, summoned him to pronounce upon some question of attire: and Charles, rising in a pet, as from some congenial conversation rudely broken in upon, began to think that his wife's dress was becoming a decided bore. Not in the least disposed to economy, and amply furnished by his grandfather for the tour, he had amused himself at first with Nelly's extravagance, and rather encouraged her than otherwise in her lavish tastes. By degrees she became inconveniently profuse; and Charles's interest turned first to indifference and next to half-concealed aversion. Her self-absorption, triviality, eagerness for applause, began to tease him; she could be stingy enough, he found, about everything but her own concerns, and, go where they would, she and her maid appeared to busy their foolish wits with new contrivances for wasting money. His growing apathy was another item in the already long list of points of disagreement. 'Love me, love my dress,' was a first axiom in Nelly's matrimonial code; and non-observance of her bonnets was only less offensive than neglect towards herself.



‘Do you approve?’ she said, turning from her mirror, where the last important touches of an artistic toilette were being hurriedly given. ‘You were very unkind, you know, the other day, about this pretty hat. Come, now, say that it is pretty, like a good creature.’

‘How much will it cost?’ asked Charles. ‘Do you know, Nelly, you carry about a little fortune on your back whenever you go out; and some fine day you will have to order a new bonnet to come and pay me a visit in gaol?’

‘Go away,’ cried Nelly, in a pet. ‘I saw you were going to be disagreeable. If you had been kind, I wanted some advice.’

‘Did you?’ asked her husband. ‘Well, now, listen: you are going into doubtful society, at your own wish, not mine—please to be discreet.’

Nelly ran across the room, and tapped him on the cheek.

‘I am not such a little goose as some people think, and do not in the least want to be lectured about taking care of myself. Comprends-tu ça, cher innocent?’

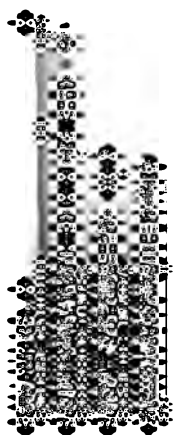
‘Well,’ said her husband, ‘beware!’ And then the carriage was announced, and Nelly’s felicity was at last complete.

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canopy of blue—cool depths of gloomy shade—fountains that plashed refreshingly down slopes of half-tropical vegetation—marble colonnades, whence the rich, deep sea, and fairy islands, and the bay, with its nestling hamlets dotted here and there about the well-wooded mountain side, might be taken at a single glance—rooms where luxury, contrived with consummate art not to appear luxurious, filled the beholder with a new, joyous respect for animal existence as something never before properly appreciated—all that the art of twenty effeminate generations and Nature, herself for once a seeming Sybarite, have devised to charm away a languid summer life: whose sullen spirits could resist so powerful a spell? Who could refuse to let in for once this sunny world upon the gloom of common hard-working existence, and to be for half a day at least a careless tenant of what this earth possesses nearest Paradise? Nelly, at any rate, forgot everything except that Charles was her ungracious husband, and Malagrida her most assiduous friend.

The festivities went on; one pleasant piece of indolence succeeded another; Charles grew every moment more ill at ease and wrathful.



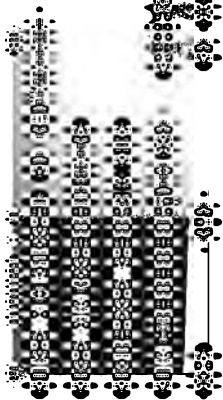
resentment, vanity, the consciousness of success, the love of teasing, carried all before them, and Malagrida's black eyes flashed out with satisfaction as her growing unrestraint of manner and new-found confidence of discourse began to assure him that they were something more than friends.

There was luncheon in the chestnut-shade beside a ruined shrine, and Horace himself might have been inspired by the classical tastefulness of the repast. Even Charles rose into a somewhat less saturnine mood, and the Count's affability caught, as it were, a mellow tinge from the genial inspiration of sundry time-stained flasks, upon which he encouraged his guests to venture boldly, refined as they were, he told them, by half a century's keeping, of all but their subtlest and most precious qualities.

'Come here, Antonio,' he cried to one of the servants who were loitering in the background. 'Kneel down by the brook and unfasten this bottle before it leaves its nice cool nest. The wine is delicate; two minutes in the sunshine, a peasant's careless handling, the merest trifle, will rob it of its rarity.'

A handsome Calabrian, whose picturesque





eye blazed with a sudden lightning; for a moment a demon possessed him, the next he stood blushing, with the shattered bottle in his hand, and the clasp-knife, the cause of his misfortune, rolled down at Nelly's feet.

'What a curious knife!' she cried, anxious to break the awkward pause which an accident produces. 'Ah, see! how the glass has notched it! If I were only queen, now, and could knight poor Antonio with it by way of consolation.'

'He deserves far more to have it stuck into him,' said the Count, laughing. 'Go away, blockhead, and let me try my own hand at the next bottle.'

Antonio slunk away, with a scowl of unexpressed anger on his brow; and Charles, less hesitatingly than before, wrote him down a villain.

As they wandered homewards, the conversation turned upon Neapolitan prisons, branded with historical infamy by the chivalrous hand of an English statesman.

'To be sure,' said Charles, 'Naples is the very place for imprisonment to wear its blackest look. In England, lock a man up in four stout walls, and give him food and drink, and he is as well

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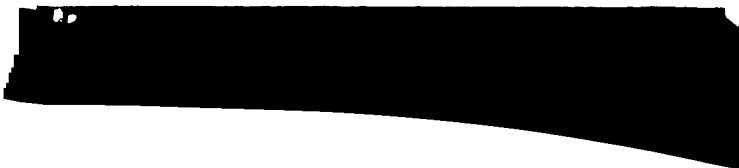
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had been over-worked the day before, but the morning's faintness was soon shaken off, and the excitement of the undertaking in prospect stirred him to the necessary exertion. When he reached the boat, Antonio met him with a letter from his master. The Count sent a thousand apologies; a feverish attack, he said, one of the nuisances with which old men must be content to put up, made it impossible for him to do the honours of the Island Prison. But he sent the pass and a letter to the Governor; also with the luncheon, some of the wine Charles liked the day before: Antonio and the boat were absolutely his, as long as he chose to keep them. Charles, half relieved at the unlooked-for freedom from an uncongenial companion, jumped into the boat; a couple of sailors hoisted up the sail into the breeze that blew freshly seawards; half a mile from shore Antonio hung out a tiny flag; and ten minutes later, Malagrida, watching eagerly from the heights, was driving full gallop into Naples.

Nelly, deep in a reverie, was extremely startled at his arrival. The possibility of an accident first flashed into her mind.

'Nothing has happened, I hope,' she said;



‘my husband started for the boat an hour ago, and was to meet you there.’

The Count smiled and looked extremely composed.

‘Let me,’ he replied, ‘relieve your anxiety at once, nothing has happened—we were to have met; but I have sent to apologise for my absence, though not, I admit, on the precise grounds which occasioned it—the hope of securing a few moments’ interview with a lady—but pray, do not start—a lady, whose society has—may I make the confession?—become to me one of the necessities of existence.’

For the first time in her life Nelly grew thoroughly alarmed. The great danger, dimly seen, vaguely hinted at, played with, disbelieved, had suddenly confronted her face to face, and rudely asserted its reality. The disgrace, the horror, the infamy, on which her thoughts had never really dwelt, stood suddenly unmasked, and filled her with a new-born earnestness. The man—or evil spirit, was it?—before her wielded a horrible fascination over her; she thought of her own powers of resistance, and her courage sank. His resolution was iron, and his will would not be thwarted; how terrible to see him angry; how

dangerous to provoke him; how certain that whatever he did, he did with the full power of carrying out, every step conducting to the next, every detail well fitted to all the rest: upon the whole, how unfortunate that her husband was away; or, oh! if she were once more safe with Margaret!

The Count looked admiringly at her, and Nelly felt an enraged conviction that he was taking an artistic pleasure in her embarrassment. He was no doubt a connoisseur in feminine distress, and found his latest victim realise all his wishes for a picturesque effect. Nelly made a violent effort towards self-control, grasped as much as she could of the necessities of her position, and resolved, with the courage of despair, upon a blind resistance.

Meanwhile the enemy was preparing to press the attack.

‘You understand me,’ he said, ‘I hope—I am sure you understand me.’

‘I understand you perfectly,’ replied Nelly; ‘you told my husband a falsehood in order to insult me with impunity. I do not know which I think most odious, the falsehood or the insult.’

The Count grew calmer and fonder, and evidently found it difficult to check his admiration.

‘In war, you know,’ he said, ‘and in something else, a stratagem does not receive, nor deserve, quite so harsh a name: and as for insult, what thought could be further from my mind? Insult! and from me to you, dearest lady? How wild an impossibility!’

‘The very blackest of insults,’ cried Nelly, with a resolute contemptuousness that the Count’s well-trained passivity appeared to flinch at: ‘the blackest, most cruel, most cowardly, that even an Italian can perpetrate.’

‘What a noble impetuosity!’ exclaimed the Count, as coolly as if he were looking at a picture: ‘how generous an anger, and yet how unjust!’

‘Unjust?’ cried Nelly, sobbing with fear and passion; and yet baffled by the other’s immovable placidity: ‘do you think, sir, that your degrading flatteries can wipe out the deep dishonour of having seemed to like you?’

‘You speak a little hastily,’ said the Count; ‘think again: “seemed to like me?” Remember yesterday’s events; our walk in the colonnade,



our evenings at the Princess's, your behaviour at the ball, this flower.'

'Stop, stop!' cried Nelly, in an agony; 'I do remember all. Would to God I could forget such unspeakable folly!'

'No, no!' said Malagrida, trying to smile. 'Not folly, mere good-nature.'

'Folly on my part,' said his companion, 'and crime on yours: however, we have explained ourselves. Now, if you know what mercy means, spare me any further humiliation.'

'There are not many ladies in Naples,' suggested the other, 'who would consider "humiliation" precisely the word for the circumstances in question. The humiliation at any rate does not lie all one way. I love honour as well as any man. Do you suppose it is pleasant to me to trick, to contrive, to employ deceptions, to tell falsehoods, as you said just now? Could anything drive me to it but the transport of affection, the abject submission of every thought and feeling to a single passionate sentiment which surely you have suffered me to fancy was not entirely unshared?'

'Leave me, leave me!' cried Nelly, less and less able to frame a calm reply. 'I take all the

guilt of a most unfortunate mistake; the guilt and the shame, enough of both.'

'I will be frank,' said the Count; 'it was not your behaviour that first inspired me with the feeling so miserable for myself, so distasteful, alas! to you. You have two claims upon every sensitive nature: you are beautiful and you are unfortunate.'

'Unfortunate!' cried Nelly, in surprise. 'You forget——'

'Unfortunate,' continued the Count, cutting her short, 'in the region in which every misfortune is a life-long calamity: unfortunate in being without the homage, the friendship, the tender sympathy, the watchful love, that, with real harmony of nature, are the happiness and security of married life—otherwise so dismal a mockery, that it may be well to discard it, even at the price of what moralists define—a crime.'

'I can bear it no longer,' cried Nelly, bursting into tears; 'pray do not torture me any more.'

'I go,' said the Count, the tenderest compassion breathing in each rounded phrase; 'but remember, for the future, in isolation, unhappiness, the cold neglect, the slighted wish, think that there is one, who, though forbidden to

breathe it aloud, honours, loves, adores you, watches for your happiness, would make your every wish his law.'

'I cannot,' said Nelly—'I will not think of you as anything but a false, traitorous friend, who deceived my husband, and tried to ruin me.'

'You are determined, I see,' said the Count: 'forgive me for saying, that there is something a little repulsive in such unfeminine resolution. I know the laws of honour; I love them as well as yourself. I sacrifice truth, virtue, a pure conscience, all to the craving I feel for a single word of kindness. Speak it and I will go at once.'

'You are a false traitor!' said Nelly. 'I will say no more than that. You are in the dark, indeed, as to our habits. If my husband neglects me, it is because he knows my fidelity is assured as much for my own sake as his. Once more, I entreat you to go. I have you in my power. I spare you an exposure; in return, spare me any longer annoyance.'

The Count saw that his attack had failed; one more shaft remained, and he shot it unhesitatingly.

'You forget,' he said, 'when you speak of


having me in your power. A less generous person than myself might be disposed to turn the tables and say the same of you. Suppose some ill-advised intruder, your husband, for instance, were now to discover us, what interpretation must he place upon our interview, these tears, this lengthened conversation, so much emphasis of manner, your past behaviour—would it be very uncharitable to suppose that I was not here uninvited?’

The Count paused, his expression became satanically complacent, and Nelly, turning deadly pale, felt that her resolution was rapidly failing her. What if she said the one kind word, and secured at any rate temporary relief? Courage, however, made another bold stand.

‘I will not be frightened,’ she said. ‘My husband will at any rate think my word as good as the man’s who has just told him an untruth.’

‘True,’ replied the Count; ‘and yet the world always takes the unkind side, and the husband, especially an easily led one like yours, is likely, sooner or later, to follow the world.’

It was the Count’s turn now to change colour. Charles had entered the outer room a minute before, had stood in the arched doorway, as the



last few sentences were exchanged, and had heard enough to convince him of the Count's contrivance. He handed Malagrida his note: both men were well-bred and self-possessed; but Nelly could see from her husband's ashy, trembling lips, that he was worked up to the last pitch of anger.

'This,' he said, 'I understand to have been a lie.'

'Excuse me,' said the Count: 'our conversation will probably be best conducted without the presence of a lady.'

'I have of course only one thing to say to you,' said the other, 'and you shall hear it speedily: traitor, liar, coward, that you are——'


'Stop,' cried Malagrida, with a sneer: 'that remains to be proved. More than one of the gentlemen who have on various occasions done me the honour of becoming my antagonists, would, I believe, acknowledge that I was bold enough to meet even an angry Englishman with calmness. I wish you adieu, sir; I shall hear from you doubtless without delay.'

'Yes,' said Charles; 'so help me God, you shall!'

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with which passion could hold no companionship. He admitted that Malagrida was a scoundrel, a greater scoundrel even than they had thought; but the admission seemed to lead to nothing more. Charles saw his way to a clear, sharp, decisive act, upon the securing of which every hope, desire, energy, was suddenly concentrated. Anstruther was fervent in admiration of Nelly's heroism. Charles could see nothing but her tempter's guilt, and the lawful vengeance which honour and inclination alike impelled him to exact. Only as he succeeded in exacting it did life henceforth seem worth possessing. All his pent-up distress rushed in upon this single point: for months past his troubles had been rankling, his uneasiness becoming daily less and less endurable, one dream of enjoyment after another departing, as gradually he awoke to the cold reality of uncongenial companionship. Again and again he had looked fretfully around him for some external explanation of his sufferings, and, as often, common sense had insisted that he had nobody to thank but himself. Half the pang of a misfortune is gone, if one can fairly lay the blame at some one else's door; but Charles, struggle against the thought as he would, had had





gloomily to admit that, if things had gone wrong with him, and were likely to go worse, the responsibility was his own alone. 'Somebody's fault,' is the ready solution of every awkward catastrophe, if only 'somebody' is forthcoming, and has shoulders broad enough for the load imposed upon them. Charles at length had found the domestic Apollyon of his fallen world; for fallen indeed it seemed—a home that was no home—a wife who proved only a troublesome ornament. Hope, no longer credulous of any but commonplace happiness, sentiment that soured for need of fitting outlet, memory that brought only agonising contrasts—and Malagrida was the cause of all—a smiling, courteous traitor, who had crept between his wife and him, had swayed her unconsciously from confidence and love, had infected even when he could not utterly corrupt, had bent his whole satanic ingenuity to impose upon her innocence, to tickle her childish vanity, to compass her and her husband's life-long disgrace and unhappiness: what was there in the world for Charles to hope, to long, to pray for but to send a bullet through his heart?

Anstruther, infected with something of the other's vehemence, and brought at last into a




feverish mood, went away with the warlike message, and demanded the interview for which Charles's last words to the Count would, he knew, have prepared him. The office was very little to his taste. He had always disliked Malagrida, but his wickedness was no new discovery, and it seemed merely a misfortune that it should have happened to cross Charles's path, and call him into a prominence which at the best was not thoroughly respectable, and at the worst might make him the hero of a scandalous tragedy. If duels ever could be right, surely this was of the number; and yet somehow Anstruther's conscience felt ill at ease. His friend's revengeful mood alarmed him. Passion was of course excusable; but Charles's constitutional gentleness seemed to have flashed at once into an almost shocking ferocity. It was one thing to feel bound to fight—such a necessity might overtake any honourable man—it was another, and a far more serious, to set one's heart upon what was after all but a civilised form of murder; and in Charles of all men it seemed the least intelligible. He tried in vain to steel his heart against the compunctions which, from moment to moment, with ever-increasing intrusiveness, beset him; the

certain notoriety, the possible misadventure, the shame, the remorse, the grief. He would deliver his message, for his solemn promise to Charles constrained him; but none the less a secret voice within protested that the encounter must never take place. It might be Charles's duty to try to fight; it was his own without a doubt to contrive that he should try in vain.

If anything could have driven him back into a bellicose mood, and closed his eyes to every thought but prompt retribution, it would have been the calm and cheerful grace with which the Count received him. Malagrida was busy writing; a heap of unsealed letters lay upon the table, and a taper still alight betokened that the morning's correspondence was but half despatched; but he broke off as Anstruther approached, smiled him the most unstudied welcome, waived the newcomer to one easy chair, threw himself lazily into another, and was prepared evidently for an amicable conversation. Anstruther began to feel embarrassed between the rigid severity appropriate to his mission and the politeness which the Count's behaviour appeared to necessitate.

'You know of course,' he said, 'the reason of my call.'



‘Only too well,’ replied the Count, with a playful sigh: ‘at my age one has an unfortunate experience in matters of the kind, and discovers that matrimonial quarrels, like everything else, follow a regular routine. But what am I thinking about? Do let me persuade you to smoke a cigarette. See, I will set you the example; then we will have some coffee, and discuss the matter at our ease.’

Before Anstruther could speak, the Count had struck a light, and sounded a silver hand-bell which stood beside him. Without a moment’s delay, a grave, mysterious being appeared at the door, glided noiselessly across the room, and stood in silent expectation of his master’s orders.

‘Coffee,’ said the Count, laconically; and the servant turned to go.

‘Stop,’ interposed Anstruther, resolved to give matters a less friendly turn; ‘I am much obliged, sir, but I need trouble you for nothing.’

‘No?’ cried Malagrida, disappointed. ‘Well, at any rate, a glass of sherry, your countrymen’s eternal beverage; and I have some that is really good. That creature,’ he continued, as the servant closed the door, ‘is the blessing of my life. Quiet, as you see; never forgot a thing in

his life ; shaves one so well that the process is a downright luxury ; is devoted to my interests ; and has no moral code whatever except what I choose to give him. A single glimmer of independent conscience, and I should send him away of course. But his shaving is wonderful ! some day you must really let him shave you, just to see how delicious that matutinal purgatory may become !'

The Count laughed cheerfully ; and Anstruther, looking far less grim than he intended, resolved to force his companion upon the unwelcome topic, round which he seemed disposed to play.

'I assure you,' he said, 'I am not in the least disposed for joking ; my message is a short and serious one ; let me deliver it, and take back your answer as soon as possible.'

'Ah !' cried the Count, as if suddenly recalled to some trifle which had slipped from his thoughts ; 'that unfortunate affair of this morning. Well, our good Evelyn is furious, I suppose. I can quite excuse him ; and yet, you know, these sublime alliances are a sort of hardship upon society at large. What is it the song says ?

*'Monsieur prend femme, c'est fort bien,  
Il la prend jeune et belle ;*

Mais comptant ses amis pour rien,  
Monsieur la prend *fidèle*.'

'Really,' cried Anstruther, starting up in impatience, 'this is mere trifling; I did not come to hear French songs, but to learn at what place and time it will suit you to make amends to my friend for the outrage you have committed.'

'You are so annoyingly precipitate,' observed the Count, lighting another cigarette; 'it is scarcely fair. For my part, I treat you like a friend—our common friend; no second that I could interpose would appreciate the circumstances so well, or succeed, as I know you will, in clearing up this unlucky misunderstanding.'

'Misunderstanding!' cried Anstruther; 'upon my word, I give it a ruder name.'

'No,' said the other; 'one of the few things I am proud of is the accuracy of my English. I mean precisely what I say, I give you my honour; the young lady's demeanour was enough to mislead any one.'

'But the lie?' asked Anstruther; 'that cannot be explained, surely?'

'I beg your pardon,' said the Count; 'and you will next beg mine, for the use of so impolite a phrase. The message I sent him was the truth;

go and ask my physician, whom I have not had time to corrupt. I wrote from my bed; I was in bed when a telegram from the government here arrived; there it is among the other papers. I was obliged to go instantly to the Secretary's. I had my interview with the minister—a particularly disagreeable one, by-the-bye—and I was on my way back, when, as bad luck would have it, I found myself within two streets of the Evelyns' lodgings. You can imagine the temptation. Under the circumstances it was indiscreet, I admit; but who is always prudent? Indiscreet, if you please, but absolutely innocent in intention. Then her haughtiness pained me. I addressed her—and with good right, surely—as a friend, and she chose to disappoint me. I may have been unduly warm; perhaps I said too much.'

'Too much!' cried Anstruther, springing up in a fury. 'Why, sir, did not Evelyn catch you in the very act of trying to intimidate his wife by a false suspicion of complicity? Neither he nor I believe a word you say. I decline to discuss the matter any more. For goodness' sake inform me of your second's name, and let me go, lest I think you poltroon as well as unscrupulous.'

'Bad taste,' cried Malagrida, in a tone of



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‘You create the necessity yourself,’ said Anstruther, as he turned to leave the room. ‘Once more, please to name a place, a time, and a second.’

‘The ruined temple for place, seven o’clock to-morrow morning for time,’ said the Count; ‘as to my second, I will let you know in an hour or two; and remember, whatever happens, you are not unwarned.’

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Anstruther found Charles awaiting his return with feverish impatience, and less than ever in a humour to be turned from his resolve. His mind seemed alive to nothing but the dread that the enemy should yet, somehow or other, escape him. He heard with a sort of fierce glee that the arrangements were complete, and that nothing stood between him and the retaliation for which he was prepared to risk so much. For the first time in his life he learnt how intoxicating a draught the mere anticipation of revenge may prove. It was as if some sudden shock had unloosed him from all the old moorings of his life, and sent him adrift upon a current against which he felt neither the power nor the wish to struggle. Everything seemed faint and indis-

tinct, and far away, compared with the stern outline of his monster wrong, and the loathing hatred which struggled vehemently for expression. Was it that a certain degree of wretchedness forces a weak, sensitive, impulsive nature towards any crisis that may relieve it from a present which it has not courage to endure? or did the strong wine of profound and violent emotion prove a dangerous burthen for a vessel too slight and fragile for serious use? Charles, as he looked back upon his months of married life, and recognised the full bitterness of the disappointment, knew that it had been as worm-wood to hungry lips, caught at any change which might perchance bring a welcome relief to grievances, rapidly becoming intolerable. A stormy gust of vehement passion caught his soul, hitherto the sport of mere playful eddies, and bore it unresisting along to an act, against which a robuster character would have struggled and hesitated. He turned this way and that for comfort, and found only aggravation of his sufferings. His thoughts travelled home to Underwood; but his cousin's form—sad, wounded, reproachful, as last he saw her—seemed to shut out every other object, and to warn him in tones,



am cross sometimes, am I? What an old wretch!'

'Yes,' said Nelly, coming across the room, and kissing him, 'my dear old pet bear. And see, there is Captain Anstruther waiting for you in the street. Do go and have a good ride; you look as ill as possible.'

Never did kiss cost the giver less, or afford the recipient a fainter pleasure. Charles got through the scene as best he could, and hurried down to his companion with a sense of relief, as if his wife's society was becoming a burthen almost too heavy to endure. The events of the day had convinced him more than ever of the hopelessness of any real community of thought between them. Surely if anything could have driven their natures together it should be such a scene as that in which they had that morning played a part. What better chance of breaking away the ice which imperceptibly gathers about the commonplace routine of life? what fitter occasion for earnest, passionate reconciliation, for mutual forgiveness, for the sort of loving confession which is the fittest prelude to absolute intimacy, for the outburst of a new growth of tenderness and devotion? The occasion had come and passed,

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more than ever inevitable. He retailed the Count's explanation as plausibly as he could, tried to extenuate when defence was impossible, and entreated Charles to leave his honour in his hands. Evelyn burst out into a scornful laugh, forced him to see the gross untruthfulness of the apology, and declared that Malagrida must take them for pitiful fools indeed to put them off with so sorry a device. Such a story, he declared, was just worthy of the man, and only made one hate and despise him ten times worse than ever. Anstruther saw that he was only teasing a stubborn man, and gloomily acquiesced. Charles, no longer thwarted, fell by degrees into a calmer mood; and with the outspokenness of a man over whom some great risk impends, drew nearer to the subject which was weighing upon his spirits. His tone was that of repentance and self-accusation, and yet its narrow intensity struck Anstruther as unfeeling. His very pathos was self-centred; his compassion scarcely reached beyond his own misfortunes. What right, his listener asked himself, had anyone with a woman's—with such a woman's—happiness in his keeping, to throw away his life in a mere revengeful pet? 'To tell the truth,' Charles said, bitterly, in



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‘Yes,’ answered the other; ‘and here I am now, with not an interest in the world, going to shoot or be shot to-morrow morning, and sublimely indifferent, upon my word, as to which alternative happens to turn up.’

‘For goodness’ sake do not talk like that!’ cried Anstruther; ‘I hate to hear you. What misanthropical demon has painted the world so black for you?’

‘I am not amiable this afternoon, am I?’ said Charles.

‘To tell the truth,’ said his companion, ‘you are not. Suppose we ride homewards?’

Charles turned his horse without a word; and Anstruther, baffled in his attempts alike at advice and sympathy, began fervently to wish the expedition at an end. This was not the way, he felt, in which two friends ought to talk on the eve of what might prove eternal separation. Still less was this the mood in which a man with such business as Charles’s on his hands should nerve himself for the morrow’s possibilities, and prepare for manliness, courage, self-restraint. Charles’s morose, hopeless indifference would have been bad at any time: when twelve hours might see him a corpse it seemed simply wicked. Perhaps

—and this was the pleasantest idea—it was mere affectation to hide a vein of sentiment which any sensitive man might naturally choose to keep to himself. Anstruther, at any rate, resolved to leave him undisturbed.

The glory of the afternoon was over long ago, the rapid twilight deepened every instant around them; and when, an hour later, they descended into the city, the narrow, overhung streets already wore the look of night. They left their horses, and sauntered, still almost in silence, toward Charles's lodging. Already they neared the door, and Charles, not able or daring to break the ice, and yet dreading to part, each with a burthen of unexpressed distress, lingered with his arm in Anstruther's, and caught at the first pretext for delay.

'How heavenly these Naples nights are,' he said; 'let us go and take a turn by the shore, and then you must come to tea with us.'

'Ought you not to go in now?' suggested his companion, provoked at the sort of unconscious selfishness which the proposal involved; 'Mrs. Evelyn will have been expecting you long ago.'

'No, no,' said Charles, impatiently; 'do not grudge me half an hour's moonlight, and one


more walk with you. Come, here is a cigar for you.'

Anstruther resisted no more; and the two picked their way, as well as the rare and flickering lights allowed, through the gloomy bye-street towards the Toledo. As they turned a corner, some one, unobserved before, approached nimbly from behind, and was slipping across towards the darkest side of the road; when, seeing that he was observed, he paused, made Anstruther a graceful bow, and with a courteous '*Felicissima sera, signori,*' hurried away before them.

'Some bland rascally Neapolitan,' cried Charles, as they found themselves once more alone. 'I cannot think where I have seen the fellow's face before.'

'Probably at Malagrida's,' replied his companion. 'That is his confidential rogue; and no doubt, since even ordinary mortals are no heroes to their valets, he could probably, if he chose, give us a pleasing insight into his master's peccadilloes.'

'A pretty chapter of revelations!' said Charles; 'for my part, I seem to know too much already. Don Giovanni is bad enough without making friends with Leporello. What villiany is the creature about now, I wonder?'



‘Malagrida is in a scrape with the government—malversation of royal funds, or something of that sort. I dare say he is at this very moment under examination, and telling lies as fast as possible. They said at the Club that all his papers were seized this afternoon.’

‘The scoundrel!’ cried Charles. ‘Society will owe me a statue, I am sure, if I succeed in putting a bullet into him.’

The words were scarcely out of his mouth, when Anstruther, turning suddenly round, pulled him violently into the middle of the road, and with a shout of ‘Murder!’ struck out with his lead-handled riding-whip into the entrance of a pitch-black passage, in front of which they were passing. Charles, completely taken by surprise, stumbled and fell; a tall, cloaked figure swept roughly past them, rushed up the passage, and was in an instant lost in the darkness; a knife, slipping from the folds of his dress, fell down with a metally ring upon the pavement at their feet.

‘I knocked this out of the villain’s hand,’ cried Anstruther, picking up the dagger, and pulling Charles violently off the ground. ‘For God’s sake, let us get out into the open streets; what thieves’ den have we contrived to get into here?’

I caught his eye, as he was in the very act of striking at you. Half a moment later, you would have had this into your back.'


'Come,' said Charles, still only half recovered from the shock of so sudden a fall; 'there is a carriage, let us drive home. I will not be killed before to-morrow morning if I can help it. This is some devilry of Malagrida, I could take my oath.'

'You might safely do that,' said Anstruther, examining the dagger as they drove past a street lamp. 'I thought I was certain of the face, and I know I am certain of the weapon. Look at these notches on the blade, and the curious handle.'

'Yes,' said Charles, as the scene of the picnic flashed back upon him, 'it is Antonio's, I know, and his master is a would-be assassin. What is there strange in that? only let me see him face to face to-morrow, and something tells me that we shall be more than quits!'

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When they got home, they found an Italian gentleman—the Count's emissary, no doubt—awaiting them. Charles was on fire with excitement, and insisted on being present while the



details of the meeting were discussed. The new-comer looked extremely grave, and had evidently an embarrassing behest.

‘You were to have met the Count to-morrow,’ he said, blandly, as soon as some rather rigid salutations had been interchanged. ‘I am here on his behalf, and——’

‘I *am* to meet him,’ cried Charles, bursting in at the first symptom of any interference with his design; ‘the time and place are fixed; he has promised to come; his rascally servant tried to stab me ten minutes ago; and come he shall, I am resolved; no power on earth——’

‘Stop,’ answered the other; ‘as to his servant attacking you, I am of course utterly in the dark; but it is really impossible; my friend was as anxious for the encounter as yourself. Forgive me for observing that he had far less reason to dread it.’

‘Let him come, then,’ said Charles, violently, ‘or I shall persist in believing and calling him what I have already called him to his face—a coward!’

‘Unfortunately,’ replied the Italian, ‘it is no longer in his power to rebut the charge. His movements for the present are unhappily con-

trolled by a necessity superior even to that of clearing away so painful a misconception. You know that he has been of late connected with the ministry of finance—its irregularities and confusions, and the neglect of his predecessors, render it a dangerous post. Something appears to have gone wrong, and the minister, as is always the case, saves his own reputation at the expense of his subordinates. The Count's secret papers were suddenly scrutinised. His devotion to the Holy See, his zeal for an exiled dynasty, from which his family have received a thousand benefits, had betrayed him, alas! into communications hardly compatible with the loyalty of a public employé.'

'You mean,' said Charles, who listened with ill-concealed impatience to his visitor's nicely-rounded periphrases; 'you mean that he has been acting as a spy from Rome, and employing state funds against the government he served.'

'Unfortunately, yes,' said the other, 'since you like that blunt way of putting it; and the result is that his flight became a matter of necessity. As it was, he galloped out at one gate of the villa, as the order for his arrest was coming in at the other; and arrest in this case would, you know, have meant at least imprisonment for life.'



‘And our meeting?’ cried Charles, his voice trembling with excitement as the full import of his informer’s message became apparent, ‘does he mean to fly from that too?’

‘He does, indeed,’ replied the other; ‘your own good sense will show you, in a calmer moment, that he had no other course. His retreat is unknown, and must remain unknown, even to myself. Meanwhile I am the bearer of the sincere apologies, which, under the circumstances, are all he has to offer.’

Charles sprang up, essayed to speak, but suddenly stopped, gave a half-smothered cough, pressed his hand to his chest, and sank backward on the sofa. Anstruther jumped to catch him as he fell, and burst into an exclamation of horror as he caught sight of the dark-red stream that was trickling from his lips, and the death-like pallor of all the face beside. In a few seconds, however, the fainting man revived, stared with a half-unconscious languor at the faces which hung anxiously over him, and beckoned towards the room overhead. Anstruther had no difficulty in understanding the import of the sign, and was already in the passage on his way to fulfil the mission it enjoined, when Nelly, frightened by

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That night, as he walked home, he revolved the matter in his thoughts, and acknowledged that on every point his sympathies were against the husband and with the wife. He was sorry for Charles's mishap; he was far sorrier for the distress which it occasioned Nelly. A man's lungs, like everything else about him, were scarcely his own to do what he pleased with when another person's happiness depended on their integrity. Charles's present precarious condition resulted principally, the doctor said, from his unnatural excitement. What business had he to work himself into such a fury? He had bent his thoughts upon revenge with a selfish intemperate forgetfulness of everybody's interests and wishes except his own. His egotism had betrayed him into positive inhumanity. No doubt the wife of such a man would have excellent reasons for the estrangement to which the whole chapter of misfortune might be traced. Misappreciation, in such a case, was an almost criminal stupidity; even Malagrida, scoundrel as he was, had shown his taste. Anstruther resolved that the first day Charles was well enough to be lectured, he should undergo a sharp admonition as to his matrimonial shortcomings. Meanwhile

Nelly was elevated to a picturesque eminence as the victim of undeserved neglect; and, since she could not be loved, claimed, at any rate, to be sincerely pitied.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## ERLE'S WOOING.

Aveugle, inconstante, O Fortune !  
 Supplice enivrant des amours !  
 Ote-moi mémoire importune,  
 Ote-moi ces yeux que je vois toujours !

Pourquoi dans leur beauté suprême,  
 Pourquoi les ai-je vus briller ?  
 Tu ne veux plus que je les aime,  
 Toi qui me défends d'oublier !

THE letter in which Nelly announced her husband's illness found Margaret already occupied with a presentiment of coming misfortune. The insight of affection—even where affection has received a deadly stab—still lingers on; and for months past she had seemed to know instinctively that all was not well with the two, whose happiness had been purchased at such fearful expense to herself. Charles's letters grew from week to week more spiritless, unenthusiastic, and dreary. There was an absence of enjoyment, a quiet

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hoplessness about them, which seemed even more depressing than outspoken complaint. To Margaret's ear, listening carefully for every undertone, they sounded almost like a cry of distress. Nelly's raptures about her happy lot grew rarer and less exuberant, and were grounded more than ever on other topics than her home and husband. Neither of them had much to say about themselves, or anything about one another. What was the reason, Margaret asked her own heart, of so unnatural a constraint? What could it be, but that they were suffering, and that their trouble was beyond the reach of sympathy, consolation, or encouragement; and what could that trouble be but the one? the possibility of which already haunted her like some evil dream. Indignation — such gentle indignation as she had ever felt — died down at the thought that the offence might thus early be bearing its bitter fruit of unavailing remorse. Her cousin had been weak, vacillating, faithless; he had given her such a wound as made her feel half indifferent to any other pang; he had destroyed her dream of happiness at the very moment of realisation; love between him and her was for ever extinguished; and yet it was



Possible loss means possible gain,  
Those who still dread are not quite forsaken ;  
But not to fear, because all is taken,  
Is the loneliest depth of human pain.

Surely, she thought, life could have nothing worse to bring her than the acute distress, to the smart of which she was bending her whole powers, with martyr-like fixedness of will, to grow accustomed. She felt like some patient flinching under a terrible operation, able—and only just able—to endure the agony without undignified outcries. That she was able to do so, experience had now convinced her; but habit failed to render the task as much easier as she had allowed herself to hope. Past times, struggle as she would against the forbidden luxury, crowded in upon her thoughts, and memory tortured her with the contrast between the ideal of her earlier hopes and the stern future which was opening upon her. Her grandfather's age, and the infirmities which even now made him dependent upon her companionship, offered a welcome scope for loving energy; and, she rejoiced to think, would probably still further tax her powers of self-devotion. Had he been a querulous, exacting invalid, with a hundred troublesome caprices, she felt within herself a strength of endurance,



which she could gladly have diverted from her present misfortune to some other less absorbing object. Her larger sorrow showed all the common grievances of life almost in the light of a relief.


While Margaret was thus steeling herself to fortitude, Erle was daily relapsing into deeper discontent. He had effected what repairs it seemed wise to undertake at once, and time began to hang heavy on his hands. Bricklayers, though not quite so ruinous as his uncle thought them, are yet expensive guests; and Erle, for the first time in his life, found himself pinched for money. Only a part of the house was restored; but this was enough to seem horribly uninhabited. The passages echoed to his solitary footstep, oppressed his soul with loneliness. The dining-room, glittering with paint and varnish, fresh from the contractor's hands, seemed far too large, too fine, and yet too gloomy to be in the least comfortable. The new proprietor ensconced himself in the study, filled it with arm-chairs and sofas, got a few favourite books about him, created a congenial atmosphere of untidiness, and seldom summoned up resolution to undertake a voyage of discovery into any other portion of the house.

Then Erle found the duties of his post by no means so light, or so easily fulfilled, as inexperience had led him to expect. He had long, troublesome mornings with his bailiff, and came at last to the disagreeable conclusion that the man was cheating him and must be sent away. The parson of the parish only half liked the improvements in the school; the villagers regretted their stinking hovels, and complained that his model cottages gave them the rheumatism, and stopped up the patent ventilators with wisps of straw and defunct petticoats. He put up a fountain on the village green, and the little boys covered it with chalk illustrations, while their mothers supplied themselves with water from a neighbouring horse-pond. Altogether the regeneration of society, especially country society, seemed a thankless task; and Erle began to doubt whether the wisest thing was not to leave the poor to themselves. He consulted the clergyman, and the clergyman, who had grown old under his uncle's régime, said that 'upon his word he thought it was; if people liked close air and muddy water, what was the use of giving them anything else? As to poisoning the children, why, every brat in the place for the last

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appearance. Already a younger generation was in the field; and though many a judicious mother, well versed in the rental of Sharningham, beset him with hospitable offers, Erle acknowledged to himself that benevolence and worldliness alike were thrown away, and that woman's society, with a single exception, had lost its former charm; and this one woman, so the adverse fates decreed, showed not the slightest inclination to admit him to anything beyond the most commonplace acquaintance. There was that in Margaret's demeanour which warned him from any attempt at increased familiarity. Try as he would he found her invariably the same, friendly, gracious, good-natured, but palpably indifferent. The very ease with which she talked and laughed with him, and the openness with which she abetted her grandfather's injunctions to come frequently to the Manor for advice, implied an utter absence of any feeling but such as all the world might know. Part of her office was to keep her grandfather well amused; and since Mr. Erle's visits answered that purpose, it never occurred to her to discourage them.. Grappling with a secret trouble, and nerving herself resolutely for the difficult task of endurance, she had no room in



her thoughts for any other phase of sentiment; still less was she inclined to believe that anything could ever tempt her again into that dangerous region, from which she had just beaten so painful and humiliating a retreat. How delicious its atmosphere, and yet how full of mirage—how tempting its paths, and yet had not each a pitfall? how assured its enjoyments seemed, and any fugitive caprice might turn it into a worse than wilderness!


Was it something said,  
 Something done,  
 Vexed him? Was it touch of hand,  
 Turn of head?  
 Strange! that very way  
 Love begun.  
 I as little understand  
 Love's decay.

*R. M. 1872*

Warned by a single lesson, Margaret renounced for ever a happiness that crumbled to dust beneath the first touch of the hand that grasped it. The very idea of feeling again for anyone as once she had allowed herself to feel towards her cousin, seemed to shock taste and conscience, almost as though it were some contemplated act of infidelity. If *he* had forgotten the silent avowal of sympathy and attachment—the words and looks that bound

their souls in one—the little acts, trivial or commonplace, but fraught to lovers' eyes with so profound a significance—*she* at least would stain her soul with no such inconstant desertion: where she had worshipped once, there she still must kneel, though the shrine was tenantless, and the altar shattered in the dust. Her ideal was hopelessly destroyed; common sense demonstrated that it had been a mere romantic dream: yet it was too dear to turn away from. She loved the frank, gentle, tender Charles of old times; he was her own; she had poured out all her treasure of devotion in his behalf; and she could not, even if she wished, replace the recollection by a present, full of shame to him and misery to her. His fall—for that he had fallen rather than been found out, she liked to think—was their common misfortune; and it was one which, for her at any rate, admitted of no remedy but patience.

Erle strove to believe it impossible that he could really care about anyone who so completely set him at defiance. The longer he strove, the more signal his non-success became. The very effort to ignore it drove the passion deeper down into his nature, and gave it a vehemence which



struggled more and more rebelliously against attempted repression. And yet as soon as he set foot in the Manor House, and Margaret greeted him with smiling composure, his courage died away, and the hopelessness of the enterprise seemed more than ever apparent. When his discomfiture could not quite be concealed, Margaret, merely vexed that he should be in an unamusing mood, and watchful for the Squire's good spirits, forced herself to a more than usual liveliness, and seemed impliedly to warn him against the capital offence of being dull. Erle, in secret indignation, made spasmodic attempts to follow her example, and ransacked his brains for stories, as if his life depended on the number of times he made the Squire laugh. Mr. Evelyn, unconscious of all but the result, thoroughly enjoyed his guest, and listened with amused curiosity while the flagging neophyte detailed his numberless discouragements and growing scepticism.

'My dear fellow,' he said, when he heard of the parson's retrograde suggestions, 'there is always some horrid old woman, who lives on to a hundred and two in defiance of everything that ought to kill her. There are some people, you know, who really *can* not die, try as they will; but it is a

mere struggle of nature against the outrages those men commit.'

'Well, but,' objected Erle, 'what do you say, Mr. Evelyn, to the fountain? pure, cold, sparkling—everything that water should be; and my Sharningham blockheads persist in regaling themselves on duckweed and mud! It is really too provoking!'

'Blockheads?' cried the Squire; 'of course they are. Your poor uncle spent fifty years in confirming them in blockheadism, and his nephew must not grumble if it takes fifty years to get them into their right senses again.'

'Heaven forbid!' Erle said, with a groan. 'I assure you my patience is ebbing away with frightful rapidity.'

'At any rate,' protested the Squire, 'you must hold out till after our board next week. You know we are to have another battle.'

'That horrid board!' exclaimed the other. 'What was it Sydney Smith called them? Bos, fur, sus, atque sacerdos—pigs, bullocks, clergymen, and thieves! What can one expect against such a phalanx of stupidity?'

'To kill the pigs, plough with the bullocks, and convince the clergymen. What can be simpler?'





'Well,' said Erle, 'we shall get beaten as sure as possible!'

'Not a bit of it,' cried the Squire, with enthusiasm. 'When you are as old a campaigner as myself, you will know that the obstinate people always carry the day, and refuse to budge an inch till they have got all they want.'

'Obstinacy!' answered Erle. 'For my part, whenever an improvement has to be effected, I always fancy every man, woman, and child in the place up in arms against the scheme, and

'Joining in one harmonious grunt,

"We wu'nt, we wu'nt, we wu'nt, we wu'nt."

'Those must be the pigs whom you have already decided to kill,' said Margaret, laughing. 'But, Mr. Erle, you ought to be really thankful for a little wholesome resistance. It would be too dull to have your way at once in everything.'

'Of course,' put in the Squire. 'When the Czar was over here, there was nothing that tickled his fancy so much as the idea of anybody holding out against the Government. He declared that he meant to have an opposition of his own, as soon as he got back to Russia.'

'The Czar of Sharningham,' said Margaret, 'likes undisputed authority. I feel convinced, Mr.

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'Then I should cry, "Starvation and independence!" and retire upon my laurels to the work-house.'

'And I should give in ignominiously,' said Erle, 'as I always do. But joking apart, Miss St. Aubyn, don't you think I have a good right to find my throne a dull one?'

Margaret watched her moment for escape from a conversation that threatened every instant to take a serious turn.

'No one has ever a right to be dull,' she said, 'least of all upon a throne.'

'But supposing one cannot rule?'

'Better and better,' said Margaret; 'then you have the excitement of trying, and the delightful probability of an outbreak.'

'And yet,' objected Erle, afraid to carry the conversation to the point he wished, and yet unwilling to forego the chances it might bring him — 'and yet you have no outbreaks here. Has it ever occurred to you to look for a stormier kingdom, where your talents for despotism would find an ampler scope?'

'Never,' said Margaret, with an easy frankness, which convinced her hearer that the thought of which his own mind was full had never once

occurred to her. 'I am entirely content. I share my sceptre with the pleasantest possible companion; my subjects, I fancy, love me; and I should be broken-hearted to think of leaving either.'

Prudence warned Erle to desist before defeat became a perfect rout. Could any schoolboy of eighteen, he asked himself, have conducted his attack with a more bungling faintheartedness? Margaret did not even suspect his attachment, and he lacked the skill—or courage was it?—to break it to her. He had been only just sufficiently master of himself to ignore the disappointment which her speech unconsciously inflicted; he trembled like a coward before the chance of the still more decisive overthrow which an explicit avowal would almost certainly entail. Why was it that here alone he experienced an awe, a self-distrust, a puerile bashfulness, that rendered victory more than ever improbable? How was it that the only woman he loved should be the one of all her species to whom love could least easily be made? Was he doomed to have a volume of 'Rejected Addresses' compiled exclusively from his own personal experience? Was he, the hero of a hundred balls, after all, the wrong

material for pleasing those whom alone it was worth while to please, the thoughtful, serious, refined? or was there about Margaret some secret charm, that repelled while it fascinated, and robbed those who came within its reach of every faculty but passive admiration?


That there was some fascination Erle was less disposed than ever to doubt. His timid helplessness, his nervous apprehension of a decisive crisis, his tame submission to an equivocal repulse—all convinced him that he was spell-bound. Margaret's beauty grew all the more striking for the lines which here and there gave evidence of a hidden struggle, and of the strength of character which day by day grows from a misfortune courageously confronted. What, thought her admirer, could be more pure, refined, dignified, than every look and gesture of this most unapproachable of beings?

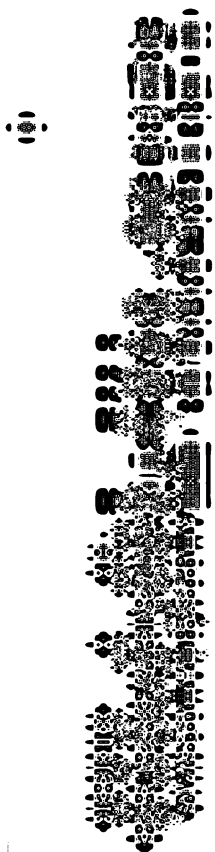
Sublime significance of mouth,  
Dilated nostril full of youth,  
And forehead, royal with the truth—

Who could despair while such a prize, however far away, was still in view? Erle was obliged to console himself with the hope which is the proverbial resource of unreciprocated love, and with the reflection, which vanity allowed, that the task

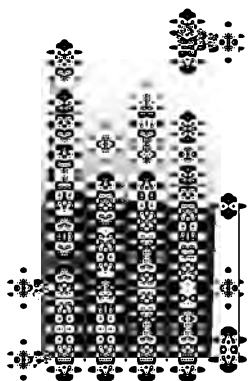
which he found so difficult, other and less skilful wooers would in all probability, should the occasion arise, ascertain by painful experience to be impossible.

A fortnight later Lady Dangerfield gave a state dinner, and Erle was once again translated from the region of enforced resignation to that of hopeful audacity. Fortune, for once in a benignant mood, rescued him from the perils of uncongenial companionship, and placed him at dinner exactly where most in all the world he wished to be. With Margaret beside him, neither Sir Agricola's pomposity nor his lady's freezing airs inspired their accustomed terror and fatigue; and Margaret herself was conscious of a feeling of relief when a serious baronet, with whom for the preceding quarter of an hour she had been exchanging the minute-guns of laboured conversation, was summoned away to another part of the room, and Erle succeeding, at his hostess's behest, to the vacated dignity, seemed prepared to defy the dulness of which Lady Dangerfield's visitors too often found themselves the victims. There had been a meeting of the Heavyshire Agricultural Association the day before; and Lord Ernest, who now sat by the





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‘Appropriate, was it not?’ said Lord Ernest.

‘The “hearts” and “hands” are of course my troop of yeomanry, who liked the compliment exceedingly, and drank my health three times in the course of the evening.’

‘Very good speech,’ said the laconic baronet to his neighbour—‘very clever young man—ought to come in for the county.’

‘True,’ said the lady addressed; ‘but, you know, the Duke has another scheme on foot. The Clyffe faction is too formidable to be trifled with, and—’

The end of the sentence was drowned in the surrounding buzz of voices; but Margaret was well enough up in county gossip to guess to whom it must allude.

‘Yes, Mr. Erle,’ she said, ‘is it true that you and the Duke are going to fight the county at the next election against all the world?’

‘I devoutly hope not,’ cried Erle. ‘Parliament, of all things, seems to me the most intolerably fatiguing.’

‘And to me,’ exclaimed Margaret, whose readings to the Squire had made her a keen politician, ‘the most delightfully exciting. What can be better fun than a really good debate?’

‘But the really good debates come only once



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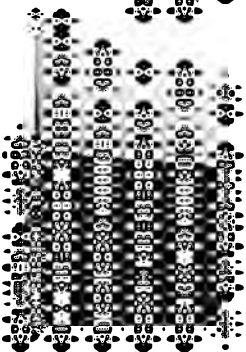
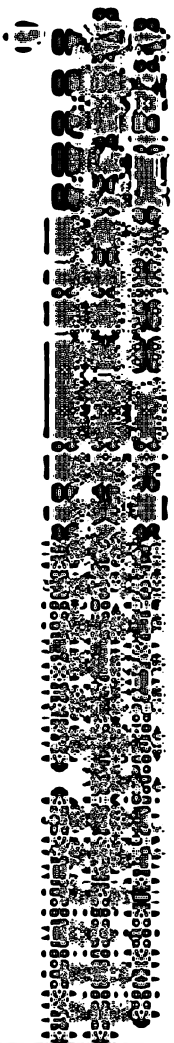


## CHAPTER IX.

## FAREWELL.

We have met late: it is too late to meet,  
 O friend, not more than friend!  
 Death's foregone shroud is tangled round my feet,  
 And if I stir or step I meet the end.  
 In this last jeopardy  
 Can I approach thee, I who cannot move?  
 How shall I answer this request for love?  
 Look in my face and see.

CHARLES'S misadventure proved less trivial than the doctors had at first pronounced it. The lady itself was unimportant enough, but he showed an unexpected feebleness in rallying from it. For weeks he seemed prostrate, without any discoverable cause. He had youth, freshness, and an apparently healthy frame in his favour, and yet he languished like a worn-out man. A lethargy, against which he could scarcely be brought to struggle, hung upon his senses, and seemed to weigh him down lower than his physical ailment rendered natural. Was there anything, the phy-



prepared the way for an end as welcome as it was inevitable. The previous period—his deepening discontent with Nelly, the miserable affectation of cheerfulness, the remorse which, hour by hour, cut deeper into his soul, at last his unrestrained fury against Malagrida, his blindness to everything but the one imperative necessity for revenge—all seemed like an evil dream, with which he had nothing more to do. It had passed away; and it was pleasant to have some clear, well-defined barrier between himself and it; could it have been *himself*, he wondered, this violent, selfish, uncontrolled creature of passion, ablaze with hatred and resentment, longing for another man's life, with an eagerness which, if Christian morality went for anything, made him a positive murderer? No blood happily had been shed, but twenty times, in imagination, he had put his foot upon Malagrida's throat, and crushed down his last convulsive, agonising scream for mercy. How horrible, how sickening, the recollection seemed! How blood-stained, in the truest sense, the soul where such passions had found a home! What felon, doomed for execution, ever, if the truth were really known, carried about a heavier load of guilt? What tremendous import, never felt be-

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was there to long for in life, except one other sight of Her, whose reproachful image seemed evermore to haunt him, and to whom such reparation as dying lips can make might yet be paid. What happiness, except once again to hear her speak, and to know by one more kindly smile that he was not utterly unforgiven.

\* \* \* \* \*

The summer was well on, Naples grew distressingly hot, and the doctors threw no impediment in the way of a journey to England. It could, at any rate, they said, do no harm to an invalid who, like Charles, seemed to depend less on the atmosphere he breathed than the thoughts and interests which occupied his mind. The change, perhaps, might serve to rouse him into the energy which alone seemed wanting for perfect restoration. Some hidden melancholy possessed him, and variety of scene might, in all likelihood, enable him to shake it off.

Homeward accordingly they started; and Underwood was already in preparation for the arrival of the expected guests. All predictions of improvement, however, were speedily falsified as the sick man began to near his home. Either the unaccustomed effort of the journey, or some new



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‘I dare not try to tell you how fervent my penitence has been.’

‘Nor I,’ said Margaret; ‘how easy I find it to forgive. Believe me, I search my heart, and find no particle of resentment.’

Charles pressed her hand to his lips, and crowded the whole outburst of gratitude into a single fervent kiss.

‘But that is not all,’ he said, after a moment’s pause, as if collecting himself for some new effort of self-humiliation, ‘do you know who it was that ruined me? blind, and cowardly, and worthy of ruin as I was, yet, one might have hoped, not sunk so low as to be the dupe of Florence Vivien’s transparent treachery.’

‘Do not talk of her,’ said Margaret; ‘I know too much already; I would rather hear no more.’

‘I was her dupe,’ continued the other, unheeding the interruption, ‘because—God knows why—I chose to be so. Her words, her glances, her very gestures were each a calumny, and each directed at yourself; and I was mad enough to look and listen, and force my conscience to believe itself convinced, when in my heart of hearts I guessed the falsehood of the whole. Could anything be too heavy a punishment for a folly

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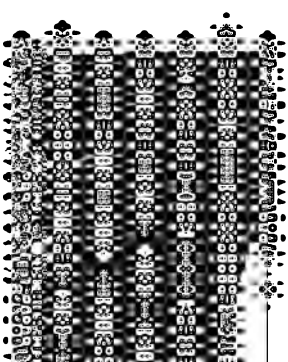
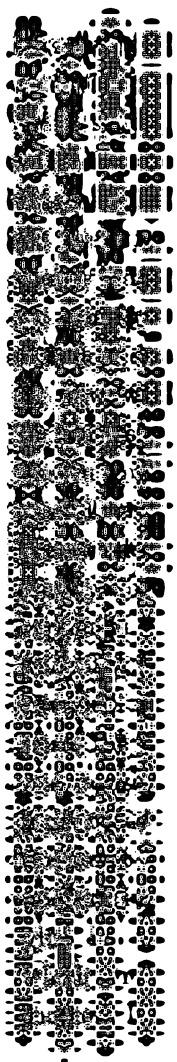


weighing the words in his thoughts; 'well then, my mind is at rest: my journey's end is accomplished.'

And yet, almost as he spoke, a keener sense of dissatisfaction, disappointment, humiliation, than any he had yet felt gathered upon him, and steeped him in despair. The last resource of consolation, to which he had fondly looked with a hopefulness that intensified with his increasing misery, had been tried, and failed to give him relief. He felt passionately in love; a fervent repentance swayed his whole being; he could have knelt down in sackcloth and ashes, and wept the bitter tears of remorse and shame and frustrated devotion;—and Margaret stood before him calm, forgiving, and sufficiently mistress of herself to speak of her sorrow as of a thing of other times. Could she ever really have loved him? could she have felt their separation as he had pictured it to himself—the overwhelming calamity of a lifetime? was she not even now, by her own confession, a stranger to the grief, which more than anything else was helping him to the grave? There was something humiliating, something cruel, in the thought. Why was he to suffer alone? How cold, how stern her words, as

he thought them over and measured their exact import. Her very forgiveness—was it not half contemptuous? Could one forgive so easily, except when one had ceased to feel? Did not the very expression of her attachment seem more like the carefully-defined barrier, beyond which, with cold, unimpassioned dignity, she was forbidding him to pass? She had obliterated the vehement, disastrous, soul-stirring phase of their intercourse, and restricted him to the meagre recollection of a childish intimacy. 'It is so that I wish you to think of me;' that is, 'I forbid you even in thought to regard me except as the chance companion of your boyhood, the object of its superficial sentiment, the partner in its foolish pleasures. From all that is profound, interesting, intense, I banish you for ever.' And this was the scene for which he had dragged himself, scarcely more than half alive, to England, and of which he had dreamt—as parched and flagging wayfarers in the desert dream of cool fountains and shady groves—the one exquisite satisfaction for the chance of which, even in a death-struggle, it is worth while to creep onwards, and which, once obtained, will more than atone for months or years of pain. Margaret forgave him: and the

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plea for forgiveness—a look, of dying eyes perhaps, which might have told the story distinctly enough—Margaret felt that even now the desertion might have been forgiven; and Charles, once dead and gone, remained for ever in the secret place of her heart. As it was, tenderness seemed as if put to flight by so rude and irreverent a touch. She too had looked forward to this scene—had pictured it a hundred times as horribly inevitable, as the crowning point of her trouble, as the very crisis of her life; she had shuddered many a time at the bare thought of the desperate wounds which she fancied it must set bleeding once more. On the contrary, she came out from it with almost unruffled feelings. She pitied, and she forgave sincerely; and the very ease with which she did so, convinced her that she loved no more. Charles's behaviour had been less a monstrous wrong which nothing but the highest charity could condone, than the mere necessary failing of a feeble character, which must needs fall when the temptation offered, and upon which the indignation that may exist between equals would be merely thrown away. But indignation is nearer to love than the pity which is half contempt; and when, a fortnight





## CHAPTER X.

## FANCY-FREE.

— *Paulatim abolere Sichæum*  
*Incipit, et vivo tentat prævertere amore*  
*Jampridem residues animos desuetaque corda.*

EVERYBODY was extremely shocked to hear how the bride who had left her home so short a time before in the full flush of youth, beauty, and hopefulness—Fortune's spoilt child—was returning under so dark a cloud of calamity; and the interest of the Heavyshire ladies grew still more poignantly intense when, a few weeks afterwards, it became known that Nelly was not only a widow but a mother; and that a little being, of whom some privileged visitors at Underwood had already been allowed to catch a glimpse, had opportunely arrived to save the line of Evelyns from absolute extinction.

Lady Dangerfield, indeed, when she heard the news, had broken into a sort of disjointed rhapsody, in which the frequent recurrence of such

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air of melancholy of which hitherto Nelly had never even suspected the existence.

There was something dreadful, too, in putting on a cap; and when the natural excitement of a new effect had died away, she felt horribly conscious that the head-dress which custom assigned her was the reverse of becoming. Then Charles had been very kind and gentle the last few months; and it had been shocking to see him grow weaker and paler day by day, and to have the doctors coming oftener and oftener, and looking more and more serious, and at last pronouncing recovery impossible; and then the days of darkness, and mourning, and muffled sounds, and mysterious footsteps—so strange, wretched, alarming, that Nelly resolved secretly to banish them as far as possible from her recollection. Still her bereaved condition was not without its advantages; and since it was a paramount duty—as all her advisers told her—to try to be resigned, she forthwith did try, and succeeded wonderfully well. There was a sort of harrowing pleasure in being the centre of general commiseration. All the world pitied her, and in course of time she began to pity herself. It was frightening, yet somewhat delicious, to know that

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—though piety forbade her to do more than faintly recognise the fact—almost distasteful. His temper, sweet enough at times, had at others been gloomy and capricious. He had been a difficult person to live with and to please; and Nelly, even in her tears, felt a sense of relief that the embarrassing obligation was no more imposed upon her. His literary instincts, his taste for art, his occasional outbursts of enthusiasm, had often puzzled and distressed her. Many a time in talking to him she had been at a loss for the right reply, or had found that she was sailing quite beyond her depth, amid shoals and quicksands of an unknown and dangerous region of thought. There was something in him, she felt, that found no counterpart in herself, which rendered real union impossible, and accidental outbreaks a matter of necessity. Her tender moods were sounded in a different key from his; and ever and anon, without the least intention, there came a frightful crashing discord. She was conscious of no faithlessness, for she had regarded him throughout with the same calm equable complacency, from which, except when he was unreasonably ill-humoured, she had never felt a temptation to decline.

And now it was all over: and Nelly had nothing to do but to nurse her sorrow and her baby, to submit graciously to a great deal of ready condolence, and to dress up the memory of her husband with precisely the sort of attributes which pleased her fancy most. Margaret lavished a tenderness upon her, more watchful, more pathetic, more really lover-like than any remembered experience of married life. Again and again she would break off their common talk or employment by a caress, for which some sudden irresistible impulse of fondness was the only excuse. Again and again a smile—more pain than pleasure—a passionate kiss, a sudden rush of tears, told Nelly that in some way, she knew not how, she had touched her sister's sense, and was more than ever mistress of her heart. Margaret, on the other hand, found something strangely sad, at the same time half humorous, in the gentle touch of melancholy which Nelly gravely mistook for a heart-consuming sorrow. In the grave attire of her new estate, and with the solemn demeanour which she considered its appropriate pendant, she looked more comically child-like, more airily light-hearted, and, to Margaret's eye, more bewitchingly pretty than ever. Sorrow had come

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a heart, if heart it could be called, where half-a-dozen beauties reigned, or claimed to reign already. How unfair it seemed that those who gave so little should be entitled to ask so much, and should so seldom have to ask in vain! 'She's beautiful, and therefore to be woo'd; she is a woman, therefore to be won.' How easy, how natural, how much a matter of course, the disposal of a woman's passion. How pleasantly the rougher, stronger sex wielded the sceptre which convention put into their hands, and, despot-like, chose here and there the favourite whom for the moment they delighted to honour. But how slight the fondness, how meagre and superficial the devotion that could be versatile like this. What was such a transient liking but a mere insult to the solemn, earnest, intense emotion that had coloured years of Margaret's life, and which was her only idea of the relationship of real attachment. She had loved once, and the wound, of which her love had perished, had seemed to pierce to the very centre of her being—was excruciating, even now, to think of. But how many such wounds were given; how lightly the world talked of them. Were there not even people base enough to take a quiet satisfaction in the know-

ledge that hearts were broken for their sake, and precious offerings of love, although they chose not to accept them, poured out in their behalf? How monstrous an injustice it seemed; how barbarous an ascendancy; how wise the haughty few who, instinctively sagacious, or warned, like herself, by bitter experience, locked up the precious gems from profane grasp, and found shelter in safe seclusion, from a homage always more unmeaning than it seemed!

Margaret, it will be seen, had set her heart on old-maidism, and used, with her grandfather and sister, to extol that estate as the only one worthy of a woman of spirit. Without a touch of rudeness, she gave each rash intruder to understand that a chasm, wide as heaven and earth, separated her from all that had the least affinity to sentiment. Erle came over, full of romance, tenderness, and poetry; found himself, perforce, discoursing of cottages and village-clubs and infant-schools, and the new wing for the county hospital, and everything else that he especially detested, and went away at last in absolute despair. A luckless dandy from a neighbouring regiment put his reputation as a lady's man to the test, tried to be familiar, and for the first time in his life felt completely

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disconcerted. Lord Ernest protested that she was the best-bred woman in the county, but came signally to grief in his attempt to put his admiration into words. Henry VIII., so historians assure us, ought to have been born in a world where there were no women. Margaret, had it been possible, would have preferred a world in which there were no males, except grandfathers and elderly clergymen; or, like the princess, inscribing on the portal of Underwood,

Let no Man enter here, on pain of death!

to have created for herself and her sister a refuge from the danger, suffering, and humiliation which one-half the human race was constantly inflicting on the other.

So a year passed quietly away, and at its close Margaret, reviewing the period with the keen-sightedness of practised observation, began to be aware that Nelly's spirits were by no means as completely unimpaired as their earlier revival had given room to hope. For months past she had begun to flag; the sympathy she received grew more and more depressing; and when the excitement of a striking calamity had passed away, there was a dreadful blank feeling which crept upon her, the very neighbourhood of which



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the house. She had heard them called vulgar people, and now for the first time she understood the force of the accusation. The Major, in his undress, was by no means the bright, talkative, amusing man of the world that society believed him. He carved in solemn silence at dinner, snubbed his wife and daughter, read the paper unceremoniously all through the evening, and took as little trouble as possible about so insignificant a guest as Nelly felt herself to be. Oh, that she and her baby were once more safe back to the pleasant quiet Underwood, with no one more formidable than her grandfather to be afraid of, and Margaret close at hand for sympathy, counsel, or protection.

When bed-time arrived, she fled, weary-hearted, to the nursery, longing for companionship that was at any rate sincere, and privately making up her mind that neither her own restlessness nor other people's entreaties should so easily again suffice to tempt her from her home. But when Florence next day began to be confidential, the breach which time had silently wrought between the two friends became at once apparent. Nelly found herself unaccountably tongue-tied about all that most concerned her. Florence

discovered that Nelly in throwing off her childishness had lost her only charm. She nursed the baby with resignation for five minutes, till an opportunity arose for restoring it, without unpoliteness, to its proprietress; but it was the grown-up baby, Nelly, frightened, thankful, submissive, that had pleased her fancy, and this was to be found no more. In her place there was a sedate, melancholy, determined little personage whose thoughts seldom travelled beyond the management of maids, and the most appropriate cut of children's frocks. What could be more horribly uninteresting? Florence went into the guest's bed-room, and found that, except a New Testament and a copy of 'Advice to Your Mothers,' Nelly's literary necessities were completely unsupplied. Neither of the two volumes seemed in the least attractive; and the scanty supply, which in other days would have seemed simply amusing, now excited Florence's contempt. With vexation of spirit at the loss of a promised enjoyment, she resigned her fondling mood, and like an angry child, flashed speedily into indignance, and afterwards into something like resentment against the plaything with which she no longer cared to play.



Nelly, perfectly unsuspecting, and frightened only at her non-success, explained her embarrassment by some fancied alteration in her entertainers rather than in herself; and really grateful for the kindness she had once received, determined, however much against the grain, to gratify Florence's curiosity as to her married life.

'You know,' Florence said, talking to her of her husband, 'he was so old a friend of mine—who could help liking him? I wonder if he ever thought of me, among other home recollections?'

'Yes,' Nelly said, innocently, 'I think he did. I scarcely like to tell you, but you will understand. In his illness he grew quite delirious, and we had a dreadful time; and all through his fancies seemed to be running on you, and always the contrary of what he really felt—that is what generally happens, the doctor said. Well, he would groan, and sigh, and beat his pillow, and talk of you, and call you the most dreadful names—traitress, and fiend, and Evil Genius—and cry out that you had planned his ruin, and robbed his life of joy, and were killing him with misery. And then, when the feverish time was

over, he would grow calm again, and gentler and tenderer than ever, and never know a word of all he had said. It was terrible, was it not?’

‘Terrible,’ said Florence, uneasily—for Nelly’s story sounded to her like a dead man’s malediction—‘but it is cruel of me to let you talk like this. Come, and you shall show me your baby.’

And so the little creature was produced, and Florence, as she sat playing with it in her lap, and forced her lips into a smile, felt all her heart within black with shame and remorse, and the guilty memories which she had often tried to ignore, but which rushed back now upon her conscience like a legion of avenging furies, taking up their abode with undisputed right, and making peace for ever more impossible.

And then, since self-accusation is so grievous an employment, Florence looked around for somebody to share her burthen, and fixed remorselessly on Nelly, as responsible for part at least of the misfortune. Why had Charles been miserable, except that she was too weak, too childish, too utterly uninteresting to make a tolerable companion? How could a stranger, judging merely by exterior, believe her to be so inane as had



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their relationship was completely different. Florence had once been kind to her, had arranged a few pleasant parties, had given her, not from mere disinterestedness, a good place in the theatricals, and there the obligation ended. She rapidly grew insubordinate at her companion's patronising tone; she was provoked at being treated like a child. In their whole interchange of thought each struck a different chord, and the results were necessarily inharmonious. Florence at last grew more and more outspoken, and where she had at first merely hinted, began to affirm. A real vein of sentiment mingled with her wounded pride, and quickened her annoyance at Nelly's thankless mood. After all, she had, in a sort of fashion, loved this little creature who now, from sheer waywardness, rejected the proffered boon. Florence tried not to acknowledge to herself how much it vexed her. Then Nelly's serious air became her so ill, and was more than provoking.

'What,' Nelly said to her once, when they were talking of her future life, 'marry again?—oh, never, never! How could I bear to think of it?'

'My dear creature,' Florence said, with a half-scornful laugh, 'take my advice, and indulge

in no needless protestations. Of course you will marry again, all in due time, and come to me once more to secure you a husband.'

The speech was rude, coarse, cruel; and Nelly fired up.

'Secure me a husband?' she said, blushing red, and tremulous with the excitement of approaching encounter; 'I really have not a notion of what you mean!'

'Have you not?' asked Florence, fairly vexed beyond all self-control; 'well then, I mean that but for me you never would have been your cousin's wife. You did not know, I suppose, that Margaret wanted him ten times as much as you did; and that it was only my judicious aid that secured you the victory.'

'What!' Nelly cried in horror, her cheek completely dismantled of its recent roses, 'did Margaret love him, then?'

'Come, come,' said Florence, 'pray do not affect such amusing simplicity—in love with him! why, the very week he proposed to you I had a world of trouble and contrivance to keep his heart—a fickle one, after all—at your disposal, instead of your sister's.'

'Then,' said Nelly, jumping up in a passion,



tormented her, 'she has not been teaching you not to love me?'

'She has been teaching me,' Nelly said, with a new-found earnestness of expression, 'that I have never loved you a thousandth part enough.'

Her sister was startled at a vehemence of manner which betokened something more than mere childish effusion, and puzzled herself with vain conjectures to explain so unlooked-for a result of a companionship which had hitherto been to her the invariable signal of disaster.

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down. The Major found his opinion of less and less weight at county meetings, and his authority not seldom confronted by a defiance that was almost insolent. Mrs. Vivien found her prestige endangered, her parties ill frequented, her visitors few, and those few disagreeably compassionate. Lady Dangerfield met her accidentally one afternoon in the High Street of Sandyford, and descanted in sepulchral accents upon the transient character of human greatness, and the moral advantages of an occasional humiliation. Mrs. Vivien would have considered all the Christian graces as dearly purchased by a single social repulse, and resolved in secret fury not to surrender the position so long as courage, ingenuity, and determination could suffice to hold it. Her difficulties were increased, and her cares embittered by the circumstance that Florence was passing rapidly into a premature old maid, and wore her spinsterhood with peculiarly ill grace. Some mornings her mother was shocked to see her looking downright haggard; some evenings she was scarcely better pleased to perceive a glow, too stereotyped to be otherwise than artificial, suffusing her cheek, and to reflect that, when nature will paint us no longer, we are perforce constrained to paint

ourselves. Florence herself was perfectly well aware of the ravages of time upon her person, and was still more annoyed by the discovery that brilliant conversation owes half its charm to brilliant looks, and that people who formerly admired her wit were at present more apt to be impressed by her acrimony.

In this state of affairs it was matter of general congratulation when one morning a letter arrived from Erle, saying that his plague of bricklayers had subsided; that the new wing, so many months in progress, was at length complete; and that he meant forthwith to claim an ancient promise, vaguely given by some of his old acquaintances when first he began to build, of assembling in honour of the occasion beneath his roof. The Underwood party had agreed to come; Anstruther was waiting in town, and would make no other engagement till he knew the day; and if the Vivians were obtainable, the scheme would be complete. Erle wrote with petitionary eagerness, as if he wanted them to come; and as it was only by some such contrivance that he could hope to entice Margaret within his walls, there is every reason to think he really did. Florence, at any rate, was too much delighted at

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tobacco: all was complete, as Erle ruefully acknowledged, with the one fatal exception of a wife; and with this deficiency the very completeness of the rest began to bore him. As long as anything remained to do, life had been, if not precisely pleasant, at any rate endurable; but now, when the ingenuity of architects and gardeners failed to suggest any desirable change, and Erle had nothing before him but to enjoy his new abode, his complete inability to do so became disagreeably apparent. Never till now had the full tedium of existence impressed itself upon him. How flat, stale, unprofitable it all appeared; what mere vegetable growth and decay the dreary round of country life; what a set of ignoramuses the sturdy squires with whom, in mere despair of killing time, he hunted and shot; how tediously silent, or still more tediously loquacious the young ladies, next whom, from week to week, it was his fate to dine—the world in general, and Heavyshire society in particular, how very far indeed from what they should be! Next week, however, he was resolved, should bring a crisis in his fate. Sharingham should henceforth either own a double sovereignty or none: its monarch was weary of a solitary throne. If

Fortune smiled upon the enterprise, well ; if not, the house should be shut up, the proprietor would start on a tour to the Antipodes, the gardens should go to ruin, the village should relapse into congenial untidyness ; dirt, damp, and solitude should once again resume their sway ; and Margaret should at any rate be forced to perceive how much mischief her obdurate mood had occasioned.

Nelly, meanwhile, though frightened at the idea of being so soon again confronted with her antagonist, looked forward, nevertheless, to the expedition with eager excitement. Her whole being seemed to crave for change ; she sickened with a sense of want, the very vagueness of which was a fresh element of distress. She loved her home and yet it wearied her. Margaret was a dear noble creature, but almost oppressive in her nobility. The discovery which Nelly had made at Clyffe, though it intensified gratitude and devotion, yet seemed to lift her sister to an eminence too lofty for the unconstrained affection of equals. Such a self-sacrifice was something almost awful in its grandeur. To desire a thing, as Margaret's vehement nature would, she knew, desire it ; to resign it without a struggle ; to

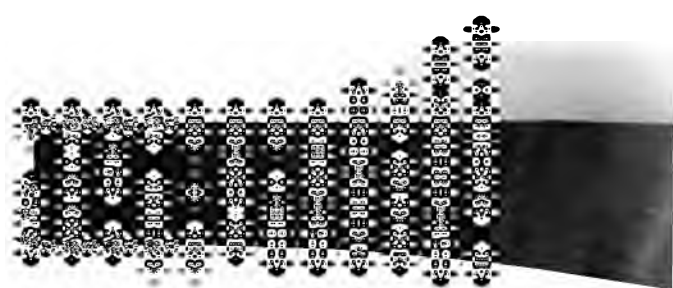


its natural embarrassment. It was sad, but far from disagreeable to see him once again, and to chat with unrestraint about old times, scenes which they both remembered, pleasures enjoyed in common, interests with which none but a participator could fully sympathise. It was pleasant, too, to know, as Nelly instinctively did, that her companion enjoyed it quite as much as herself, and to be practically assured that there were, after all, people in the world with whom it was possible to feel entirely at ease. Nelly went away to dress in the greatest spirits; and assured her sister gleefully that Mr. Erle, she felt convinced, would prove himself a most agreeable host.

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Both men remembered her a queen ; and if fallen now, she was still, in their thoughts at least, invested with something of her old *prestige*. Both of them had known her haughty, dazzling, unattainable ; and in their company Florence felt again once more her former self. Erle she knew that it was in vain to try to like, and she therefore resolved upon detesting him. But Erle's companion, though not a conquest worthy of her earlier fame, had something about him that pleased, interested, and almost touched her. As the handsomest man in the house, he seemed, by the traditions of conquest, her lawful prey. A few years' experience of barracks and drawing-rooms had left him still as frank, simple, and impressible as ever. He still made love, Florence easily perceived, with the same ingenuous but versatile sincerity as characterised his earliest flirtations. Towards herself he tempered the deference of admiration with the privileged familiarity of a friend. How pleasant the union seemed ! how honest his kindness—how delicate his good breeding—how agreeable the conversation of a man who, if he could not amuse, knew at any rate the way to flatter ! Florence, as she watched him that night hovering about the piano,



and beating time approvingly to Nelly's tremulous performance, resolved that, if perhaps barely worth winning, he was nevertheless too good to throw away, and that his subjugation should be forthwith taken in hand. Was she in love with him?—No; but she began to feel extremely anxious that he should be in love with her.

The days slipped pleasantly away. Erle, as a good host should, supplied his guests with cogent arguments against a too hurried departure, and effectually convinced the Squire that in a dozen matters all the best interests of the Sharningham community depended on his presence and advice. Mr. Evelyn, who knew not what it was to be suspicious, fell at once into the snare, and set about examining cottages, criticising fat bullocks, and laying down imaginary lines of drainage, with all the alacrity due to so congenial an employment. Erle accepted his instructor's counsels with a submissiveness that was perfectly unfeigned, and cheered himself through long agricultural mornings with a prospect of a ride with Margaret in the afternoon, or of some fortunate moment in the evening's festivities which would enable him without suspicion to indulge in the hardly-earned luxury of a *tête-à-tête*. On one of these occasions

they met the reactionary parson coming home across the village-green; and the Squire had a real struggle with himself to tame his sarcastic mood into the politeness which a churchman had a right to expect.

‘How is that excellent parishioner of yours,’ he enquired, ‘who lives on evil smells and black ditches, and as Erle tells me, has quite discouraged him as a sanitary reformer? Dead? Well, I am really glad to hear it. Do you hear, Erle, the old woman is dead; I knew it must kill her. No constitution can withstand an open ditch. Now I hope you are both convinced.’

The parson thought his visitor beyond the reach of argument, and no amount of scepticism would have resisted Erle’s impatience to get home to lunch; so that Mr. Evelyn was left happy in the belief that his morning had not been thrown away, and that two converts at least had been added to the list of believers in fresh air, soap, water, and tubs.

After luncheon the real business of the day began, and one pleasant excursion after another gave room for increased familiarity, and opportunities, to those who chose, of intercourse more spirit-stirring and confidential than was easily



Anstruther, who in former days would have thought a single smile good wages for a whole evening's manœuvring, seized the right moment for escape from beside her, and found himself, by some invariable accident, by the sofa where Nelly was awaiting the resumption of a confidential chat. Again and again, through Anstruther's friendly air and Erle's punctilious civility, she arrived at the humiliating conviction that she was *de trop*. Everybody—torturing thought!—was polite, because everybody saw that she was in danger of neglect. Nelly quite declined the reconciliation which she tacily offered her, and was evidently alienated beyond possibility of recovery. Once, as they left the room together, Florence twined her arm caressingly about her former friend, and strove to look especially affectionate. Nelly rather endured than acquiesced in the familiarity, and shifted uneasily from unwelcome contact with a foe none the less real and fierce because amicably insidious. This tender creature could, then, Florence found, be obdurate, resolved, unforgiving; she rejected the proffered peace—what easier than internecine war? She fascinated where the mistress-magician's spell was powerless—could Charity herself

#### NELLY IN TROUBLE.

endure it. Sad, desolate, conscience-stung, banished from her favourite scheme, maddened with her impotence to charm, weary as never before, insatiable as at first, the trifier with others' heart felt a new passion take possession of her. Hate began to seethe and boil, contempt laid itself into a fury, revenge clamoured for indulgence; and Florence seemed to her to understand how murderesses feel. Was there nothing, was there nobody to give relief, to slake this feverish thirst, to sweep away this little obstacle to her desires, to crush this foe, as a thing so contemptible and yet so exasperating deserves to be crushed?

No one to fling a venom in her eyes,  
Or pinch a murderous dust into her drink,  
Or make her paler with a poison'd rose?

No spell to bring one at least of her admirers back to their old allegiance? Life were miserable a degradation if it were so. In the seclusion of her own room she threw off the mask of cheerfulness, worn so painfully all day, and the bitter tears of disappointment and vexation flowed. Her liking for Anstruther had grown a despairing want; her contempt for Nelly a restless ferocity. Love, anger, pride, all

surrender worse than the worst defeat. Welcome then the battle, though at any odds! The gong that summoned her from her retirement might as well have been sounding the tocsin of some death-struggle of infuriated Amazons. She rose sternly to obey it, smoothed her brow, banished the fierceness from her lips with a smile, reassured herself by a last glance at the mirror of the faultlessness of her attire, and resolved, for one night more, at any rate, to be as beautiful as ever.

Nelly, meanwhile, in happy unconsciousness of the storm she had provoked, had for days past been experiencing the pleasantest of all possible changes in her state of mind. Life seemed suddenly filled for her with a new radiance. Whence came it?—She knew not, nor wished to know. But it lit up all her being with joy, energy, hopefulness. She had been at Sharningham but half a single week, and yet between her old and her present self there seemed already a gulf—wide, deep, impassable. Her old home life, how far away it seemed; how grave, monotonous, and sad; how could she ever have borne it? how could she bring herself to bear it once again? A sudden light-heartedness, springing to life, assured her of her unimpaired capacity for mirth, and of

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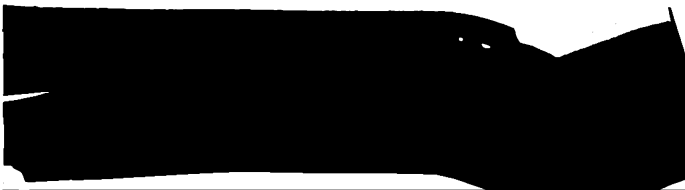
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#### NELLY IN TROUBLE.

Let mirth, let music, gild the mask of care,  
But ask not thou if happiness be there.

Had the enquiry been put to herself, 'there' referred to her own mind, Nelly must the truth was to be known, have answered the affirmative. 'Death in her heart' indeed! Say rather excitement, delight, the rapture unexplained good spirits. She shut up the book, seized a garden hat, danced gaily across the passage into Margaret's room, and assured that nothing but an instantaneous game of croquet would save her from the natural ill effects of a whole morning devoted to sedentary occupation. Before they had been playing ten minutes, Nelly laughed so heartily at her sister's unsuccessful performance, that Erle, who was closeted with Squire, discussing the merits of superphosphate of lime, and Anstruther, who was reading week's 'Saturday Review' to the ladies in the drawing-room—both overheard the sound, both, like hypocrites as they were, found excuse to bring their employment to a speedy close, to enjoy the luxury of a stroll upon the lawn. Erle gave up ignominiously about the time when Anstruther had the effrontery to declare that 'Saturday Review' contained no other read-



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Formed me, a thing of noise and smoke,  
With, like their own, a face of brass.  
Like them, my powers of work are small;  
Like them, my palmiest days are past;  
I shall explode, I know I shall—  
I know I shall explode at last.

Lady Dangerfield, at any rate, very nearly exploded with wrath and indignation as the passage caught her eye; and her daughter, who had devoted the last ten days to mastering the original song, and had meant to produce it at this very party, felt naturally aggrieved at so impertinent an adaptation of a serious performance. The young lady deplored a dishonoured song, the old one an endangered institution. Both sympathised in aversion to the common foe. The daughter looked meek, as injured merit should; the mother wore a sterner air, and, as Florence observed to her mother that night, loomed majestically in the distance, like a three-decker prepared for action.

‘Indeed, Mr. Erle,’ she said, ‘the scurrility now-a-days the fashion is perfectly unbearable. Sir Agricola says it is the Paper Duty being taken off. What do you think?’

‘The worst of any great institution,’ said Lord

Ernest, from the other side, 'is that every fool thinks he has a right to spill some nonsense over it.'

'Yes,' said Erle, trembling for the turn the conversation might take, 'there ought to be a general proclamation to scribblers, "No rubbish to be shot here."'

'Yes,' said the other, 'and "Bill-stickers beware!" as they have on the hoardings.'

'And "No admission except on business,"' cried Lady Dangerfield, 'to keep off improper intruders—all the Radicals and Dissenters, and that sort of people, who never know their places.'

'Avaunt! profane, 'tis hallowed ground!' cried Erle with a laugh; 'but then you know, Lady Dangerfield, we are all Radicals in turn; and the grandsons of good Tories have to carry Reform Bills.'

'That,' said the lady, falling back upon theology for an explanation of so grievous a lapse, 'can only be owing to the Fall.'

'To the—I beg your pardon?' said Lord Ernest, who was always on the look-out for political news, and was delighted to hear anybody account for anything.

'To man being what he is,' replied his com-

panion, in a sepulchral tone reserved for occasions of especial gravity.

Neither of her companions were prepared with a reply, and a solemn pause ensued, which so instantaneously infected all one end of the table, that Anstruther, who was talking the greatest nonsense to Nelly at the other, was detected in the act, and made to feel extremely modest. Florence, who sat midway, and had a faculty for listening, caught enough of both conversations to assure herself that neither one nor the other were taking a turn at all propitious to the dignity of her family or her own self-love. On this side and that the enemy were entrenched in force—the position was critical, defence a serious task, and victory only to be achieved by some daring *coup*. Where, when, and how best to effect it?

Little did Sir Agricola, who was dining innocently beside her, guess at the moral tempest that was raging in his neighbourhood, or the secret agitations of a female breast. To do something, quick, vigorous, efficacious; to turn the ebbing tide of fortune; to strike one more blow for the success that had once been hers without an effort—if possible to affront Lady Dangerfield, but, at any rate, to humiliate Nelly,

such were the necessities which pressed on Florence's mind, and refused any longer to remain unsatisfied. She entrapped her companion into a good long, prosy dissertation which needed no replies, and set herself resolutely to think how vengeance might be best achieved, or defeat most gracefully be undergone.

Erle in the meantime had caught up the dwindling thread of conversation, and was steering the way skilfully out of the shoals upon which Lady Dangerfield seemed disposed to run aground.

'Yes,' he said, 'it is a desperate thing to think that (if one has views about anything) one's son will probably rush off in precisely the opposite direction. Here have I been busy for the last two years in doing everything my poor uncle most disliked.'

'Ah!' cried the lady, 'he used to refuse most pertinaciously to subscribe to my Washerwomen.'

'You mean,' said the other, 'that I ought to have carried out my rule of contraries with them. Well, in one point at any rate, you see, I pay my predecessor the compliment of imitation.'

'In one point!' cried Lord Ernest; 'in a hundred and fifty! Depend upon it, Lady

Dangerfield, we are an imitative race, and catch each other's faults as little children do the chicken-pox.'

'Naturally,' groaned his companion, 'in a world like ours.'

'Yes,' put in Erle, hurrying, in defiance of politeness, to the rescue of his guests, 'people are such dreadful plagiarists, and then so shockingly thankless. Governments, you know, are always copies; and rival Churches carry off each other's doctrines and ceremonies without the least compunction.'

'There are some which I sincerely wish we had left at Rome,' Lady Dangerfield observed.

'And others,' answered Erle, 'that, if everybody had their rights, ought to be sent back to Jerusalem. Nothing, they say, can exceed the ingratitude of Protestants to Catholics except the ingratitude of Catholics to Jews.'

'Talking of Catholics,' said the Major, who had taken Margaret in to dinner, and was beginning to find it a little dull—'did you hear the answer of the old French abbé at Bath? Some idiot was passing just at mass time, and thought to be facetious. "Ah! monsieur," he said, "est-ce que la comédie a déjà commencé?" "Pas

encore," said the priest, "on attend le fou. Entrez, s'il vous plaît!"

'Served him right,' cried his lordship, washing down the witticism with a glass of champagne; 'a good answer indeed.' While Lady Dangerfield, who was sceptical as to anything good coming out of a priest's mouth, and had not the least intention of laughing at anything that came out of Major Vivien's, maintained a dignified composure, as gravely imperturbable as though an army of Sydney Smiths might have in vain essayed to tempt her to a smile. Major Vivien, however, did not in the least care whether she laughed or no, and fell back upon silence and a partridge's wing with the equanimity of a man who has contributed his due share to the public entertainment, and whose conscience is thenceforth at rest.

The ladies rose to depart, and Florence, as she watched the exchange of glances with which Nelly and Anstruther consoled each other for a temporary separation, confessed to herself that the moment for decisive action, if it had not already passed, was fully come. Not a moment must be lost, if Nelly was not to be left triumphant mistress of a bloodless field. Anstruther was

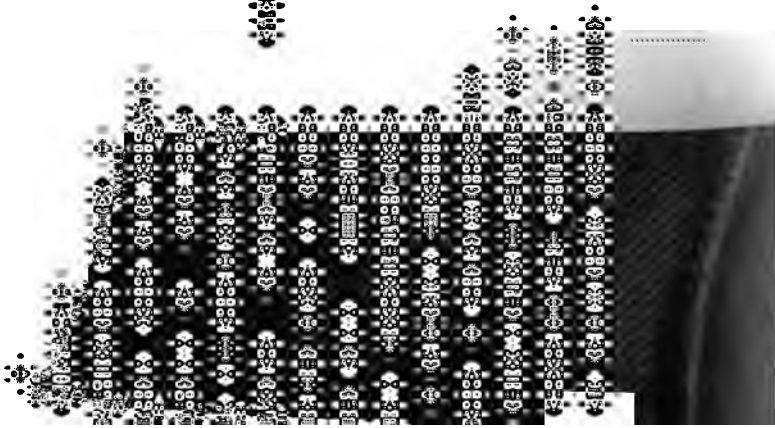


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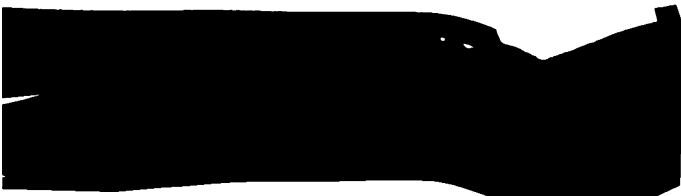


#### NELLY IN TROUBLE.

deep water, safe guardian of inconvenient secrets. 'How was it,' thought the singer, as her gaze crept round the room and rested on the frequenters—'how could it ever have been that a drop of blood—the fitting counterpart of his thoughts—went out of fashion?'

Anstruther called out a careless Bravissimo and forthwith, as if weary of the interruption, resumed a confidential talk. Everybody, however, declared—and with perfect justice—that the song was magnificent, and Florence's conception of the music a masterpiece of operatic insight.

Then followed Nelly's turn; and Florence, traitress as she was, sent her away with sincere and words of encouragement; and, before Anstruther could decently escape, took possession of her deserted seat. Nelly's performance of 'Excelsior' must, to an impartial observer, have seemed extremely tame, or escaped tameness only by conspicuous short-comings. Tastes, however, especially men's tastes, are capricious; and while she was cheerfully floundering about the slippery heights, and committing all sorts of musical outrages upon the mountain's top, Anstruther, with honest, lover-like satisfaction, nodding to



‘The hero of “Excelsior,”’ said Anstruther, ‘apparently thought not.’

‘Yes,’ said Florence strongly, ‘and that is why I detest him. Some poor girl with whom, in some less exalted mood, he had probably flirted disgracefully, meets him halfway and entreats him to remain—

Stay, she cried, and rest  
Your weary head upon this breast.

and then he is wretch enough to go away and leave her. Depend upon it, he died not more of the snowstorm outside than of a heart of ice within.’

Florence, always an actress, pressed her hand to her heart, and breathed an unsuspected tenderness into the lines; action and tone alike, though half in joke, were full of pathos. Anstruther, an experienced judge of such affairs, became at once aware that his companion was not quite her usual self. What in the world could she be wanting? Upon what new mood of her flighty temperament had he suddenly stumbled? With the inquisitive daring of a Columbus in sight of unknown land, he hoisted every sail and steered, without an instant’s hesitation, for the strange region which Fortune had suddenly brought within his ken.

‘Oh! but,’ he said, laughing, ‘one has known people with the iciest hearts imaginable who yet seemed extremely flourishing.’

‘*Seemed* so,’ Florence suggested, by this time keen for the defence of her new-formed theory. ‘Depend upon it, they were in a bad enough way, if the truth was known. To my mind, it is the dreariest way of dying to have one’s sentiment die first.’

‘You seem in little enough danger of that,’ said Anstruther. ‘In old times, you know, we used to call you “la belle dame sans merci,” because you laughed our tender moods to scorn.’

‘Used I? Well now, to make amends, I will be frank. You cannot fancy how full of sadness those “old times,” you talk of are to me.’

‘A world of prodigies!’ cried Anstruther. ‘Sadness, indeed! and pray for what?’

‘I scarcely know,’ said the other half-carelessly, half with an air of melancholy. ‘For one thing perhaps—because one doubts if one’s old friends are still the same.’

She shot a glance at him—sharp, piercing, expressive—which in former times would have brought him to her feet. Anstruther, however, was entirely glance-proof, and had evidently no

suspicion of the attack. For once it was the truth precisely that she had been telling: she felt weary, deserted, and horribly alone. The sight of lovers around her increased her sense of isolation; the man before her was, she knew, fretting to get away, and she tried in vain to keep him.

‘Positively,’ he said, ‘there is Mrs. Evelyn singing again—do let us go and listen.’

Already he was on his way towards the music, and Florence sat on alone, cherishing an angry mood. She was defeated; but need she thus tamely, thus helplessly to accept defeat? She was powerless to charm; but was plotting beyond her reach? Might not Anstruther by some contrivance or another still be forced to like her? Might not the moment of Nelly’s triumph be at any rate delayed, and a chance, if nothing more, of ultimate success be left? Powers of ingenuity, befriend her! Genius-spirit of intrigue, come once again to her appeal, and grant to so practised a votary, if not satisfaction, at any rate revenge!

She turned restlessly from the table, and saw lying at her feet what seemed almost like an answer to her prayer. It was a note of Anstruther’s received that evening, glanced at on the journey from the dining-room to the ladies, and dropped,

as retreating armies leave their baggage, in the hurry of his last escape. Florence pounced upon the prey, as if sure instinctively of its usefulness to her designs. That night she hurried away her maid, and, solitude at length obtained, was able without disturbance to read, ponder, and concoct.

‘Dearest Jack,’ the letter began, and plunged forthwith into the sort of careless chronicle of home affairs that a sister, not yet infected with a scribbling mood—fond and yet half-weary of the task enjoined by fondness—might compile for a soldier-brother’s edification. It spoke of rides and visits, and a neighbouring dance, and the pleasant tittle-tattle of a country house. It scolded him laughingly as a good-for-nothing correspondent. When, it enquired, did he mean to be at home again? and what was Sharnham like? and was that horrid F. V. as great a flirt as ever? ‘Mamma says you have much too good taste for her to be in the least afraid; and I am sure she is a million times too odious even to be flirted with; and please, the next time you are in Piccadilly, papa wants you to—,’ and then followed a list of commissions which Anstruther’s filial piety might perhaps endure, but wearisome to be recounted. So two sides were filled with

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But tell us, please, since it was so interesting, who was it from? and what was it about?’

‘Did I say it was interesting?’ replied the other, blushing at the horrible thought that his sister’s abuse of Florence might chance to meet her eye. ‘Well, for one thing, it was full of commissions.’

‘Commissions!’ Florence exclaimed, in a voice full of incredulity. ‘I should have thought you would have rejoiced to lose them.’

‘That,’ said Erle, ‘all depends upon who it is for whom they are to be performed.’

The conversation turned; and Nelly, who had observed Anstruther’s heightened colour and evident embarrassment, began to feel the most horrible inquisitiveness as to the real import of the missing document. Why need he, the most careless of mankind, be so anxious about it? why blush to avow its contents? why refuse to say from whom it came? Nelly’s heart began to flutter, as one frightful conjecture after another presented itself; and yet, why should they be frightful? and what, after all, had Captain Anstruther’s correspondents to do with her?

‘I am going to be very industrious,’ Florence said, as they found themselves alone in the drawing-

room. 'We go to-morrow, and I have promised Mr. Erle to finish my sketch of the house.'

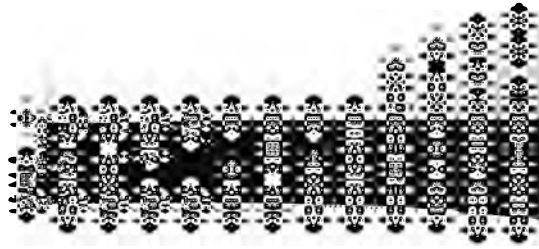
'And I,' said Nelly, 'am dying to get back to "Orley Farm"—that poor, dear Peregrine! I never could have refused him.'

'I hope,' Florence said, as she arranged the table for her drawing, 'that Captain Anstruther has had the grace to bring it down-stairs again. Yes, here it is.'

Florence gave her the book. Fifty pages on—she knew right well—Nelly must come upon something which would startle her more effectually than the best-contrived fictitious scene, How natural that, at the end of the trial, where Anstruther left off last night, the missing envelope—yes, and half the letter too, it seemed—should have been left, in a careless mood, between the pages, the last drowsy act of a wearied reader! It lay open in its resting-place, sure to catch the eye, a lurking serpent ready, as Nelly's unsuspecting foot should tread upon its lair, to spring to light, and dart a deadly wound.

Nelly tried, and tried in vain, to throw herself into the tale. How suddenly its interest had died away. What were Lady Mason's fears or Sir Peregrine's perturbing love to the sharp, cruel

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a secret, of the kind such people's as Captain Anstruther's generally are, he would be behaving rather unfairly to a certain little friend of mine; but then, you know, he is notorious.'

'Notorious?' said Nelly, as scared as if some shocking apparition had been suddenly disclosed.

'He is a licensed heart-breaker,' cried Florence, with a laugh. 'A great many men in the Guards have licences of that sort, and make the most of them.'

'Do they?' asked Nelly, trying, panic-stricken as she was, to smile; 'and what then?'

'Well,' answered her tormentor, 'I think if I were she, I should be a little discreet, because men like so to be amused, and what is fun for them is not very dignified for us, is it?'

'Have you noticed anything, then?' enquired the other in the greatest fright, with the guilty consciousness that she had been flirting a great deal more than was discreet.

'Noticed!' cried Florence with a laugh; 'you think, I suppose, that nobody's eyes are of any good but your own. It struck me sometimes that you wished to be observed.'

The cruel words pierced and stung, and Nelly could scarcely find heart enough to answer.



it, grew every moment darker and blacker and more entirely unendurable. Florence meanwhile, before she finished her sketch, took good care that the missing document, its function now fulfilled, should be transferred to a safer custody than the pages of 'Orley Farm,' and was pleased to see Anstruther, when next he came into the room, hopelessly turning over its leaves in despairing search of that which half an hour ago she had placed safely away under lock and key.

'I give it up,' he cried at last, sitting down beside her and assuming the sort of confidential air which to some women is the worst of compliments. 'And pray where is your companion?'

'Up-stairs, learning her catechism,' Florence answered with a laugh. 'Would you like me to hear you yours?'

'By all means,' cried Anstruther. 'What is it that you want to know?'

'But first,' said the other, 'you must be christened. Let me see, I think you shall be Baby-hunter.'

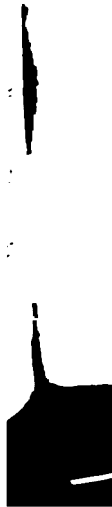
'Anything you please,' said Anstruther; 'only what does Baby-hunter mean?'

'La chasse aux enfants—a favourite amusement





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‘Dear me,’ said Florence, ‘how I should like to have one to put in a cage!’

And then, the rest coming into the room, the conversation broke suddenly off; and Florence, inexperienced in the blindness of an honest passion, flattered herself that she had done something effectual to prepare her patient’s mind for the subtle poison of contempt with which she hoped, even now, to neutralise his love.



## CHAPTER XIII.

## FLORENCE AND MARGARET.

Sing of the nature of women, and then the song shall be surely full of variety, old crotchets, and most sweet closes: it shall be humorous, grave, fantastic, amorous, melancholy, sprightly, one in all, and all in one.

No timorous martyr descending into an arena of hungry lions could have looked forward with more thorough consternation to the encounter than did Nelly to the prospect of reappearing in public, and having to behave as though the morning's discovery were cancelled from her thoughts. It is terrible, no doubt, to be eaten alive; but there are degrees of shyness for which any form of death, however tragical, would scarcely be a bad exchange. Besides her heaviness of heart, Nelly felt exquisitely embarrassed. The catastrophe which had overtaken her seemed too sudden, overwhelming, tremendous, not to be discernible to other eyes besides her own. Florence knew, of course, and Florence's mother; and both would

probably ere now have pointed the cruel darts of ridicule at the disappointment of a too courageous love. Captain Anstruther knew, for Nelly, as she looked back upon the visit, recalled too many words and looks which were meant and accepted as frank avowals of what it seemed now disgraceful to have so much as hinted at; and if Captain Anstruther, why not his confidential friend, his close adviser in a delicate affair, the natural depository of an amusing secret, the experienced connoisseur of flirtations, the cold, glittering, sarcastic Erle? Now that she thought over her visit, with this key to its incidents, how often, she remembered, had both men seemed to find some comic aspect in what she said and did; what expressive looks of private intelligence had passed between them, as Anstruther, less and less careful of concealment, had flattered her with some new politeness, or devised some bolder pretext for the prosecution of his suit. More than once she had heard them laughing on the terrace as they strolled there together—how humiliating to think that, more likely than not, the laugh was at her, and at the alacrity with which she accepted the proffered homage! What tricks might not the two, in cruel fun, have been playing upon her,

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of thought, a sort of insult which it was dishonourable even to have thought of. Nelly, startled at so serious a view of what seemed to her a commonplace offence, had let her recital fade away into indistinctness, and her sister had never invited her to be more explicit. There are some things so unutterably repugnant to one's taste that the faintest outline is enough to warn us from the annoyance of a second look. Margaret, Nelly felt certain, banished the remembrance of Malagrida as an unclean thing, driven forth in shame and loathing from the sacred precinct of an innocent mind. But, with so fastidious a delicacy, what must she not have thought of the indecorous ease with which Nelly, grown up now to woman's estate—a mother—a widow—had allowed herself to be the sport of a soldier's careless wooing? Nelly's excuse to her own mind—that she had fallen unawares in love—that Anstruther's society was irresistibly delightful—was one that it seemed disgraceful, impossible, to trust to Margaret's ear. She would forgive it, no doubt, as she would any other infirmity; but it would be the commiserating indulgence of a strong high nature to weakness which it could neither sympathise with nor

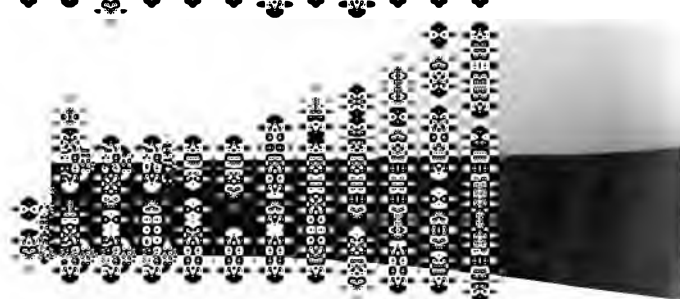
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‘You go to-morrow too?’ Florence asked at last.

‘No,’ said the other; ‘I stay to console Erle for the departure of more important guests. You have no idea how nice it is with everybody gone.’

‘Nice and dull, I dare say,’ cried the other. ‘But tell me—how are our friends the Berringtons? Shall you be there this summer?’

‘I believe I shall,’ Anstruther said, in no humour to be catechised. ‘What beautiful turf for a canter!’

‘And the interesting Georgina?’ continued the inquisitress, heedless of her victim’s endeavour to escape.

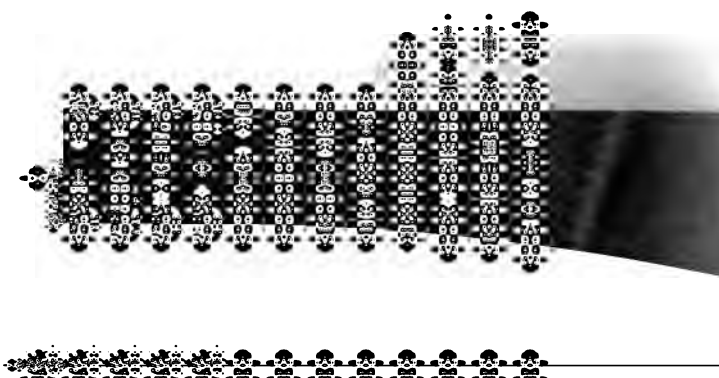
‘Still as interesting as ever,’ said the other, in a tone which implied, as he meant it should, his determination to answer nothing more. ‘Take care, Mrs. Evelyn, or you will be among the ruts.’

Nelly had already heard too much and was out of reach, trusting to her pony’s legs for deliverance from a conversation which was, she knew, devised expressly to torment her. Anstruther, as he galloped after her, was conscious of a sudden access of admiration, which threw all former enthusiasm into the shade; and resolved





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‘But are you sure?’ her sister asked, by no means convinced by what she had heard, yet afraid of even hinting encouragement. ‘How did Florence know? Did she say positively who “Georgie” meant?’

‘Yes—no,’ said Nelly, as she went back into the afternoon, and distinguished between her inferences and other people’s facts; ‘but she warned me to take care; and when I heard him talk of the Berringtons to-day, I saw it all distinctly.

‘Well, but,’ said her sister, ‘you must not be broken-hearted. After all, you have not been in love with Captain Anstruther for very long, have you?’

‘Quite long enough to kill me now with disappointment,’ said Nelly, suddenly infected with a decision and vehemence, the first-fruit of late-awakened passion. ‘I loved him—I would die for him—I *shall* die for him. Was it not cruel to play with me as he did?’

‘That is a dreadful sort of cruelty indeed,’ Margaret said, hesitatingly; for the doubt which filled her mind was one which it would have been the falsest mercy to allow Nelly to share, and she already saw her way to clear it up. ‘But, dear,

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self, and enter a region where likes and dislikes, gratitude or resentment, approval or indignation—some glimpse of the inner nature—must needs be brought to light. It was an effort to have to confess her sister's weakness, and to stand, as it were, its champion against a well-remembered foe—a painful effort, and as Margaret reflected, she seemed for an instant scarcely able to bring herself to encounter it. She more than half suspected that Florence's suggestion was a false one. It must be a fierce, stormy process, she knew, by which the falsity could be exposed. There was that, too, in her mind in regard to Florence that made anything between a studied reserve and the out-rush of a flood of passion almost impossible; a vehement, deep-seated sense of wrong, the remembrance of mortal injury, that, tamed and fettered and kept out of sight like some fierce thing, was nevertheless as much alive as ever, and would, if occasion offered, shake off its unwelcome restraint and rouse itself for actual rebellion. She had schooled herself to forgive, even to endure her ancient enemy; but it was a misfortune to be forced into the sort of confidential intercourse in which Florence's powers of annoyance would have freest play, and the torturing

recollections of the past be most vividly recalled. For years she had thought of Florence as a foe, and now in another minute they would be face to face, battling in a warfare where every blow is apt to leave a mortal wound, and for the one thing in the world about which Margaret felt the reverse of courageous—her sister's heart.

Florence, deep in a novel, roused herself from the sofa at the sound of a knock, and welcomed the invader as best her wonderment allowed. Margaret looked grave, uneasy, determined, and would not, she well knew, have done her the honour of a visit without some weighty cause.

'Forgive me for disturbing you,' Margaret said; 'do you guess why I am come?'

'Really,' said Florence, closing her novel with a resigned air, 'I am ashamed to say I don't. Do sit down and tell me.'

'I have just heard of Captain Anstruther's engagement.'

'Yes?' said the other, as if encouraging her to proceed, with the slightest possible inquisitiveness in her accent.

'The news came from you,' said Margaret, with a decisiveness that struck her hearer with a qualm; 'and I wanted to hear it from your lips, is it true?'



betrayed against her will into outspokenness, to let the secret, whatever it was, be wrested from her. That there was a secret, that it concerned Nelly, that Florence held the threads of some conspiracy against her, that in a single day now some irreparable mischief might be done—irreparable as in her own case, worse in so much as her sister was less able to endure it—all flashed into Margaret's mind, and goaded her to sudden action; anything was possible except acquiescence in so horrible an uncertainty. If Florence knew, if her knowledge were innocent, why should she refuse so studiously to tell? Margaret forgot her pride, and assumed the tone of a petitioner.

‘Please to tell me,’ she said.

‘No,’ Florence answered, shaking her head with a half-comic air; ‘how curious you are! Wait till to-morrow morning, and Captain Anstruther himself will be sure to tell you the exact truth.’

‘You are the evil genius of our family!’ exclaimed the other bitterly, as she rose from her seat with a gesture of impatience. ‘I have a charge to give you. You know for what a weight of unhappiness you have to answer?’

‘Unhappiness?’ asked the other, taking up her

novel again in a sort of desperate hope of cutting short the conversation.

‘Yes,’ Margaret said, ‘two people’s at least; and I was one of them. Judge of my distress now, that I can bear to talk to you of it—to ask you a favour. You ruined my life—for a caprice I believe—and am I likely to forget it? It is all past; the wound is healed, but it is awful in recollection. You had your whim—could you but know at the cost of how much anguish! Have mercy, and do not repeat it.’

‘I scarcely understand,’ Florence stammered, for her companion’s sudden vehemence overpowered her.

‘You do not?’ said Margaret. ‘Unhappily, I know every step too well to doubt. You brought misery upon us—not least upon the dead man, whose troubles are over; you stole him from me—you intrigued—you deceived—yes,’ for Florence gave a start of angry denial, ‘I have had the proofs for years—ever since the first—you deceived him, cruelly, wickedly, and your deception effected what you wished. Now, have I not good right to be afraid when I see you near my sister, and come upon secrets which you will neither confess nor disavow?’

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longer existed; but high on that dismal list of 'might have been's,' which chronicles an aimless life, was registered in Florence's mind an intimacy full of pleasant companionship, with the one person from whom now, so Fortune willed it, she was most hopelessly cut off; whom, having injured, she was especially pledged to hate, and whom, such are the caprices of the will, she found for the most part but little difficulty in hating. The world was full of vexatious contrarities, baffled aspirations, opportunities lost, happiness thrown away. Florence—as she sometimes found herself secretly relenting towards her foe, and touched more than she liked to own by some nobleness of act or speech—felt that the dreary philosophy was true indeed for her, and that her strongest, highest tastes were those which she had managed most completely to repudiate.

And now repentance, dreamed of often as a vague idea, seemed to come and offer itself as an immediate possibility, and her heart, with all the weariness of pent-up discontent, began to yearn towards it. There was a sort of strange pleasure in the self-abasement which it must involve. Nothing could be a less pleasurable life than that which she had led of late; no pain worse to bear

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## CHAPTER XIV.

## FIRE !

Strangers yet!  
 Will it evermore be thus ;  
 Spirits still impervious ?  
 Shall we never fairly stand,  
 Soul to soul, as hand in hand ?  
 Are the bonds eternal set  
 To retain us, strangers yet ?

WHILE feminine antagonists were warring overhead, two lovers, in the lower regions, were busy with the pacific interchange of sentimental confidences. Anstruther and Erle had both reached the point when reticence becomes impossible; and, like the shepherds of some modern eclogue, were disburthening themselves of the hopes and fears, the tender aspirations, the chivalrous extravagances, for which a congenial listener is so hard to find, and when found is, for the most part, so unsparingly employed. Both, however, found it a relief to talk, and both accordingly constrained themselves to listen.



ments bespoke a serious crisis in its owner's thoughts, 'to-morrow, I intend to be the happiest man on earth.'

'A most praiseworthy intention!' cried Erle; "'or the most miserable," you ought to add, if you had a grain of modesty.'

'No,' said the other; 'I refuse to be frightened. You are an old coward, Erle, yourself. Pluck up heart, man, and follow my example.'

'Your example, indeed!' protested his companion. 'My dear fellow, the difficulty is that Miss St. Aubyn may not be prepared to follow her sister's. If she would only give me half as good a chance of making love, I could be as enthusiastic as yourself. However, fortune smiles on the brave; and as impudence in this world is always rewarded, I am sanguine as to your success.'

'What?' asked Anstruther, as the unwelcome possibility of defeat presented itself; 'you think it a risk? Suppose I come to grief?'

'Suppose you do,' said his companion, with a composure that Anstruther felt to be horribly unfeeling. 'Well, you will not like it at all. I can tell you from experience, you know. First, you will be mad with disappointment, then melan-



‘One of the illusions of youth,’ said Erle: ‘that one has cured itself. Now I am going to set to work to cure myself of the other.’

‘Nonsense,’ objected his companion. ‘I do not know what you would have; you and Miss St. Aubyn seem to me very good friends.’

‘So we are,’ answered Erle, ‘the best possible; but half-a-dozen times a day she takes care to inform me that we are to be nothing more.’

‘You are fanciful,’ said Anstruther. ‘To my judgment she says no such thing, she likes talking to you far better than any one in the house, you may be sure.’

‘She is an enigma,’ said Erle, bitterly. ‘I have spent the best years of my life in trying to solve it. Now I give it up as hopeless. I have lived on hope till I pine for a more substantial diet. Forthwith I take a turn at despair.’

‘Despair — fiddlesticks!’ cried the other, ‘Come, come, a little courage.’

‘Yes; but this time it is that excellent form of courage which consists in knowing when to run away. To-morrow I follow my guests, and shall cut this abominable Sharningham, which I believe I have improved into the dullest place in Christendom. Bad luck to it at any rate, for the plague it has been to me.’



flame—as if joyous at the prospect of a plentiful repast—hovered, and danced, and climbed from one vantage-ground to another, ever gathering force, speed, ferocity, as it went. It had mastered the lath partition that narrowed the passages towards Florence's room; it had sprung upon the curtained window at its end; it had crept in between the floors overhead, and made its way from rafter to rafter, as each new rush of air brought something consumable within its reach, or wafted it to some new opportunity of destruction. Erle, as he staggered half-blinded up the stairs, and met the hot current that was pouring towards him, made up his mind at once that one wing at any rate of Sharningham was doomed.

\* \* \* \* \*

While he is groping his way through the confusion, and a messenger is galloping madly down the avenue to the village two miles away, let us turn once more to Florence as Margaret had left her, and learn, forthwith, what most people knew next day, how it was that the mischief first arose.

‘Can you forgive me?’ she had asked; and her visitor turning away, stern though pitiful—like some good angel when the day of grace is





equivocation; and the motive of the act, oftentimes its best palliation, was here the basest, the guiltiest part of all—an envious caprice—a cruel, treacherous mood—the desire to hurt for hurting’s sake. And then dragging all this wantonly to light, and affronting Margaret’s pure and lofty nature with its sudden exposure, she had asked—and, fool that she was, had actually expected—to be forgiven: she had been of course refused, and for the best of reasons, that such things were simply unforgivable. ‘I *cannot* forgive you,’ Margaret had said. And Florence, letting the black tide of remorse and shame pour in upon her soul, felt that neither could she forgive herself.

Wearied, and yet too excited to rest, she in vain betook herself to the novel once again, and tried to force her thoughts into another and less distressing groove. But strong as was her will, this feat proved beyond her strength: she threw away the book in despair, and springing up from the sofa, passed hurriedly into an outer dressing-room, pushed aside the heavy curtains, threw open the window and gazed out into the silent night. A perfectly tranquil night it was, sombre and misty, and to Florence’s eye, full of unutterable gloom.

How long she stood she scarcely knew; long enough at any rate for a grievous procession of guilty reminiscences to pass before her mind, each with its own burthen of distress or shame—each merciless in its accusing tones—each and all bidding her despair. She turned away, scarcely conscious of the movement, and passing, in a mere mechanical restlessness, again into her room, threw herself upon the bed, tried not to think, and in the very act of trying, fell asleep; first the deep death-like coma of physical exhaustion; then the uneasy stirring of half-awakened consciousness; then the full flow of dreams—painful, disordered, comical and yet terrifying—and the central point of each some deed of shame. All the circumstances, schemes, regrets, and apprehensions, with which her thoughts had of late been busy, worked themselves together in grotesque entanglement, whose very humour had a touch of the horrible about it. Now she was dancing once more, as of old, with Anstruther—secure of easy victory, glancing around her the keen shafts of irony, mirth, disdain, withering Nelly with a scornful look; then, somehow, began a deadly fight, and Florence was standing exultant over a prostrate foe. Nelly's face it was,

she knew, that looked up to her imploringly for mercy. And then Margaret came upon her, swift, irresistible, wrathful with a righteous ire, and smote her, she knew not how, only that she was spell-bound, and helpless, as under the hand of a superior, and cried for mercy. And next she was struggling and screaming for life in a dark, troubled water, and Margaret's hand still pressed her down—deeper, deeper. Oh, for pity's sake, one breath of air! for something was suffocating her. And then the sense of suffocation, though not quite departing, fell for a time into the background, and a song, the last that Margaret had sung, began to ring in her ears—


No light! so late! and dark and chill the night!  
Oh let us in that we may find the light!  
Too late, too late; ye cannot enter now!

Not enter? she was beating at an iron-bound door with frenzied hands, and Margaret, she knew, stood on the other side and held it fast, and barred the cruel bolts deridingly, and bade her beat on. And even while she beat and clamoured, all in vain, for admittance—she was in the pool again, hurried hither and thither by opposing eddies, and struggling, as drowning people struggle, for the dear chance of life. A plank



the air around her with a strange unearthly mist. She looked towards the window, and there was light enough to discern a heavy cloud that gathered between herself and it, which encircled her on every side—which was suffocating her as she tried to breathe it. She listened, and from the ante-room there came a sound, strange and terrifying, of rapid movement—movement such as Florence's ear failed at first to recognise, but every instant more and more distinct, and soon horribly unmistakable. She sprang up, made her way to the door, and opening it, found herself suddenly confronted by a horror as imminent and heart-chilling as any through which her feverish dreams had led her. For an instant she stood paralysed; for, turn which way she would, she seemed in the midst of flames. The ante-room was in a blaze!

A rush of smoke and fire through the doorway, for an instant made everything invisible. Florence turned to go back into her room, but the air was too thick now to see through, and her presence of mind deserted her. She looked downward at her dress and screamed with fright to discover it in flames. In a frenzy of terror she rushed towards the burning room once more, and once more the fire, raging all




the more fiercely for the draught of air, drove her backward. Turning round, and rushing blindly forward, she came upon a door, and in another instant was in the passage; ran forward through the smoke, she knew not whither—the frightful flames still climbing round her—stumbled, fell, struck violently against some opposing object—was conscious of a sudden, sharp, agonising pang, and then remembered nothing more. Hours later, the light once again dawned upon her, and looking feebly up from the couch where she lay, still faint with pain and exhaustion, she found Margaret bending tenderly over her, the gentlest compassion written in her face, and kindness so pure from scorn, that it was delightful to know oneself its object.

Florence saw that they were alone, and signalled that she wished to speak.

‘Can you forgive me?’ she said.

Margaret stooping down, kissed her brow, and whispered ‘Yes;’ and Florence, still holding her companion’s hand, as if fearful to let the signal of reconciliation escape her, closed her eyes again in the delicious content of satisfied necessity, unwilling, or perhaps unable to speak another word.



As Erle had foreseen, one wing of Sharingham was nothing next day but a tottering framework of charred beams and blackened walls. A fortunate wind, a plentiful supply of water, provided—as the Squire took occasion to point out—in obedience to his own sanitary injunctions; the timely arrival of a host of labourers, all keen for volunteer service in a popular landlord's behalf; lastly, the scattered and rambling configuration of the house itself, made it apparent, after an hour or two's hard work, that the fire might be, if not extinguished, at any rate confined, and that the main portion of the structure was safe.

Still everybody was on the move: relays of pumpers kept the engine hard at work; the hose were playing on the spots principally endangered; buckets were being emptied in every direction, where the zeal of the bystanders detected the possibility of a latent spark. Books, ornaments, furniture, whatever there had been time to save, were hastily piled up in heaps in the court-yard. Nothing remained but to watch that the flames did not transgress the limits assigned to them, and to wait till, from want of fresh material, they died away.



Harassed by the surprise, the panic, the excitement of the night, and weary with a lengthened attendance by Florence's bed-side, where she alone of all the party seemed sufficiently composed to be of any use, Margaret came out into the cool, delicious morning air, and found her grandfather in the midst of one of the groups upon the lawn.

'How is your invalid?' asked the Squire.

'Better than we could have hoped at first,' said Margaret. 'I left her just now fast asleep.'

'Well,' said her grandfather, 'it is a comfort to know that we are all safe and sound. The chances were that we should be all burned in our beds.'

'Yes,' said Anstruther, 'and all because Miss Vivien chooses to read novels in hers.'

'Now,' said Erle—emerging upon the terrace from the library, where an irregular repast had been extemporised—'I am going to borrow Sheridan's joke and invite you all to a glass of wine or a cup of coffee, whichever you please, by my own fireside. Miss St. Aubyn, will you set the example?'

'No thank you,' said Margaret; 'just now I am in need of nothing so much as fresh air. What a lovely morning it will be!'

‘Fresh air is excellent in its own way,’ cried the Squire, by this time too chilly to be theoretical—‘but for my part, at three o’clock in the morning, a cup of coffee sounds wonderfully comfortable.’

‘It does indeed,’ said Anstruther, his teeth chattering with the cold, and delighted to have an excuse for going in. ‘Take my arm, sir, or you may get a fall over some of Erle’s rescued treasures, which are lying about here in every direction. He and I carried out that cabinet between us; a heavier load, I imagine, than we ever lifted before, or ever shall again.’

‘Come along,’ said the Squire, picking his way across the turf; ‘I begin to feel something horribly like an attack of rheumatism.’

The example was generally popular: and so presently Margaret and Erle found themselves alone together, and each felt wrought into a mood in which to be alone together implied an immediate desertion of commonplace talk, a throwing aside of mere conventional behaviour, a courageous approach to the topic which Erle knew to be nearest his heart, and which, Margaret was beginning to find out, was not entirely remote from her own.



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years past must have taught you—what I mean. The one desire of my life is to have you with me here; without you I can bear it no longer. Tell me, shall I go or stay?’

At this moment the Squire, returning to his post of observation, reappeared upon the terrace, and brought the conversation to an instantaneous close.

‘Stop,’ Erle said, as Margaret started towards her grandfather; ‘a single word of answer, please, before you leave me.’

‘Well then,’ said Margaret—turning upon him with a smile, the kindest, so it seemed to Erle, the tenderest, most pathetic in the world—‘I advise you to stay; and now I must go back and see if Florence wants me.’

The sky was already pink with the dawn, a single lingering planet grew momentarily fainter, a sudden breeze seemed to stir nature into life, and a hundred twitterings from the shrubberies announced the breaking day.

‘Here then,’ thought Erle—as he watched the departing figure of his future wife, and, too much unnerved by sudden success to trust himself in another’s presence, feigned some excuse to linger on the lawn—‘here dawns the first day of ex-

istence worthy of the name. The night has been long, sombre, wearisome, God knows; will this rising sun in all its long journey look down upon a happier being than myself?’

\* \* \* \* \*

Good news travel apace, and before breakfast Anstruther rushed into Erle's room full of tumultuous congratulations.

‘My dear fellow,’ he cried, ‘I wish you joy. This time “le jeu vaut bien la chandelle,” does it not? Who but yourself or Nero would have thought of making love by the light of a blazing house?’

‘At any rate,’ cried Erle, laughing, ‘it was my own, which was more than Nero could have said in excuse for his fiddling. By the way, I wonder whether Florence did it on purpose.’

‘You suspect her?’ cried Anstruther in astonishment.

‘I suspect her of everything,’ said the other; ‘and incendiarism among the rest. Why not?’

‘Well,’ Anstruther answered, ‘at any rate no one can accuse you of not being off with the old love before you are on with the new.’

‘Love?’ cried the other; ‘it was only this morning on the lawn that I found out what it

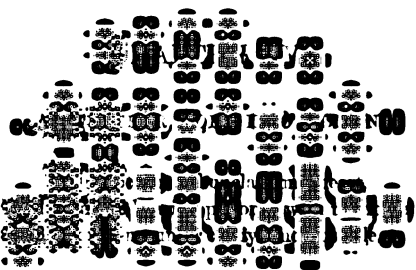
meant. Believe me, it comes but once in a lifetime.'

'You have stolen a march unfairly,' said his companion; 'but I shall catch you up; before the day is over I intend to know as much about it as you do.'

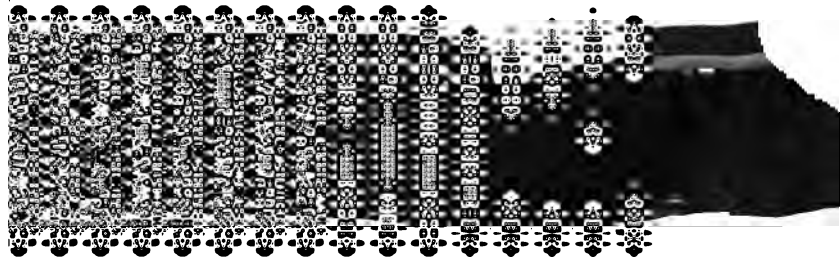




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and precarious possession. For weeks, for months, at any rate, she was prostrate, disfigured, helpless; and her helplessness perhaps contributed to intensify the remorseful mood in which her accident had found her into vehement repentance, and her reluctant liking for Margaret into a sort of passionate admiration. The creature of impulse, she felt driven now to a fondness which, once admitted, usurped at once an unquestioned ascendancy over her whole character. It was pain, but yet a pleasing pain, to humble herself before this being who seemed the very embodiment of the qualities of which Florence felt herself most despairingly in need. She knelt down in the dust, and poured the shameful ashes on her head, and—like a stern saint ruthlessly hugging the robe that galls him—pressed each humiliating circumstance closer to her pride of heart for the anguish it cost her. She laid bare her character to Margaret, and painted her life—mean, aimless, miserable—with a self-abasement which a month before she would have reviled in another as wanton infamy. In her new friend, she found that magnanimity and gentleness go hand in hand, and that the tender graces, which she had scorned as prettily effeminate, were but the



expressed itself in outward act the more chance of permanence it had. 'We will move you presently into my sitting-room, and I will send him to you.'

'The letter, I suppose, is burnt?'

'Yes,' Margaret answered; 'a good omen that all you wish forgotten will be cancelled from your thoughts and ours.'

'We shall none of us be able to forget,' said Florence, 'and I shall not try; but, at any rate, I can make my confession. That, I believe, will do me more good than anything.'

And so Margaret left her, and hurrying to her room, found herself, for the first time since the morning's interview with Erle, alone. For days past she had known that such an interview must come, and that her answer to it would date a new era in her life. She had veiled it from her own thoughts in a sort of hazy uncertainty; yet, now that the answer was given, it seemed strangely impossible that she could ever have felt really uncertain about it. Erle had petitioned, as a boon, for that which was his already to command. Her heart, cured of its old grief, was ripe for intenser happiness, closer intimacy, profounder emotion, than any that her present phase of life found room for. Her grandfather, her sister, her home,



ground, and crumbled into dust at the presence of a living reality. She had taught herself to fancy that she could never love again; in vexation of spirit she had turned her back upon all that could remind her of her first love's catastrophe; now a stronger spell than she could fight against recalled her, and the old current of her thoughts turned in a new direction, rushed forward, as fresh, buoyant, and hopeful as when, in the very opening of womanhood, she had first yielded herself with joyous credulity to a girlish attachment. Since then sentiment had been a forbidden region, for she feared to come upon the corpse of a dead love. Now Erle took her by the hand, and led her on, and she followed boldly; for she knew that it was buried out of sight, and incapable for ever after of costing her a single pang.

When she returned to Florence's room she found her solemnly studying the mirror, and reading, as if line by line, the mortifying lesson which it taught her.

'Did you ever see anything more truly frightful?' Florence asked, with a smile which strove in vain to hide distress—'I am more than ever resolved to let Captain Anstruther see me to-day.'

'It is not frightful at all,' Margaret said,

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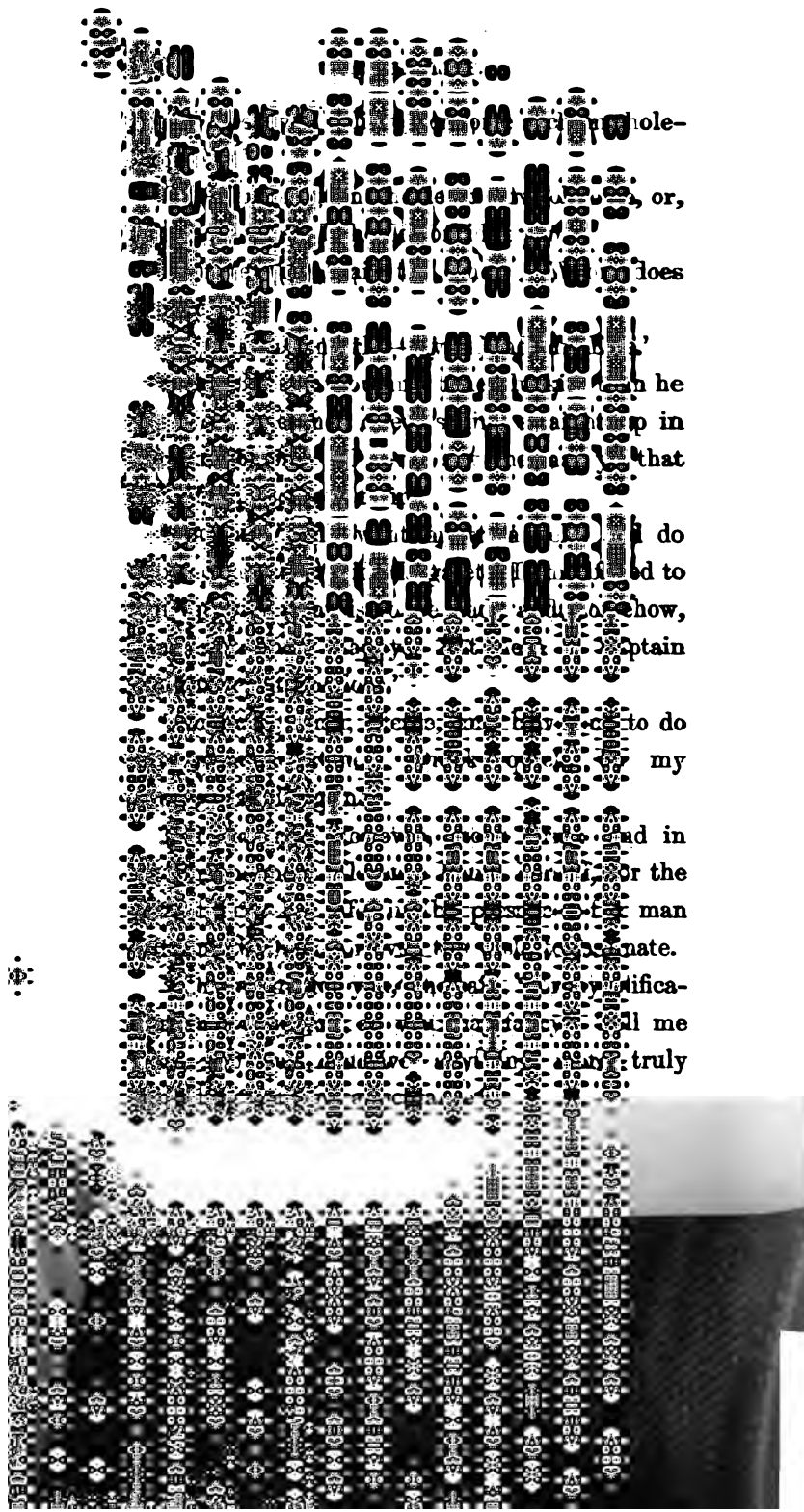
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who happened unconsciously to be plaguing me. An expression in it, construed as I knew she would construe it, served to frighten Nelly, and to bring your flirtation, as you probably observed yesterday, to a stand-still. Do you think me base and cruel? Well, I grant it was. Now, by way of amends, I urge you to make up for lost time. You have only to speak, you know. If I am any judge of women's hearts, she is in an agony till you come. Now, go this instant.'

'I will,' said Anstruther; 'but I am by no means so sanguine as you seem to be on my behalf.'

'I can relieve your anxiety,' answered Florence; 'you will owe me something for that. Take my word for it, at this moment Nelly is breaking her heart for you. Go down stairs and see if my words are true.'

'By all means,' cried her companion, with an alacrity which Florence, even in the depths of her self-abasement, was still woman enough to feel annoying. 'I shall send her up to you to bring the tidings of herself forthwith.'

One other scene, and we may let the curtain fall. Already the lights burn low, and all is



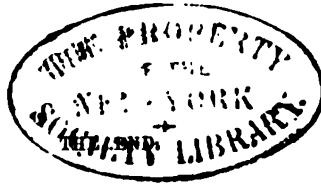
thoroughly in love, will open up new depths of tenderness, and become the best of wives, and—as her grandfather will discover—the cheerfullest and most considerate of companions.

Shall we extend our range of thought, and cast the horoscope of the inferior actors on our little stage? Let us fancy that Mr. Slap will some day find his way back to the Pumps and Fountains, and instead of satirising other people's measures, will have to sharpen all his wits in defence of his own. In the interests of domestic tranquillity we will hope that the Miss Dangerfields will realise at last their mamma's matrimonial projects, and reward her patient manœuvring on their behalf by splendid and substantial matches. Florence—but Florence, even in her new and humbler phase, would prefer to speak for herself. Let us peep over Margaret's shoulder on her marriage morning, and read the letter which a special messenger, sent betimes across from Clyffe, has brought her.

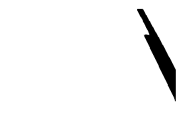
'I have been awake half the night,' Florence writes, 'and my thoughts have been so constantly at Underwood that I must send you my benediction, for what it is worth. My friend of friends, with what a treasure of happiness would I endow

you, had I the arranging of your lot! Next week we leave for Italy, in hopes of doctoring me into something less hideous than I appear at present. I shall send you a photograph, that you may judge how far the change has been successful. Among other troubles, I have forgotten almost how to sleep; and when I do, my dreams!—but I forget that I am writing to a bride. Only be happy, you best and noblest of creatures, and you will content us all; and in the midst of your happiness think sometimes of her who injured you once so grievously—who loves you so sincerely now!’

‘My friend of friends!’ cried Margaret; ‘and this from the only real enemy I ever had!’













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